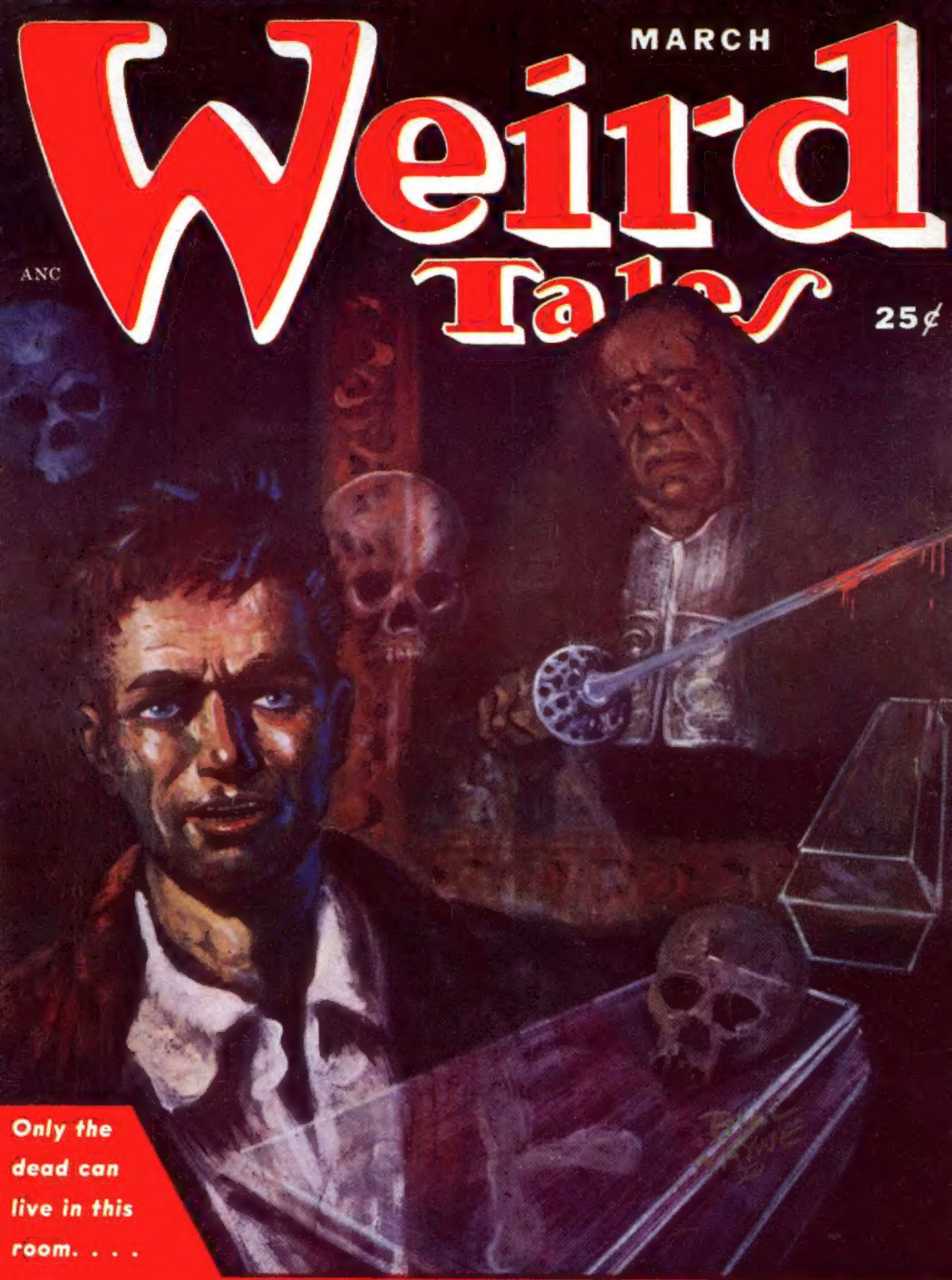
MARCH

Weird Tales

ANC

25¢



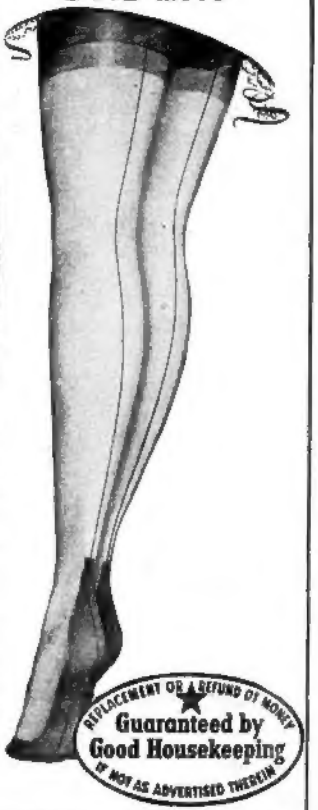
Only the dead can live in this room. . . .

"A Black Solitude"—H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

Earn Big Money WRITING ORDERS

AMAZING NYLONS

Guaranteed Against
RUNS AND SNAGS
Regardless of Cause!



The world's ONLY complete, nationally advertised nylon hosiery line actually guaranteed against runs, snags or excessive wear, REGARDLESS OF CAUSE! It's amazing, but true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—Kendex nylons are replaced FREE if they run, snag or become unfit for wear within entire guarantee period! Every weight from sheerest 15 denier to heavy 70 denier—all gauges up to luxury 60 gauge—all sizes, lengths, popular shades, fancy heels, black seams—full fashioned and seamless. Nothing is missing to make sure every woman is pleased. In spite of the amazing guarantee, retail postage prepaid prices are no higher than comparable quality national brands. Should free replacement be necessary, actual cost is cut in half! How could any woman possibly resist saving money and solving her hosiery problems? NOT SOLD IN STORES. Men and women wanted NOW, spare or full time, to write orders and earn big money. You can get orders even if you never sold a thing in your life!

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Kendex gives you FOUR complete lines, including sensational men's hosiery line actually guaranteed for ONE YEAR! Any pair not giving satisfactory wear within 12 months is replaced FREE without question. All styles, patterns, colors, yarns (including nylon) at lowest prices that mean steady income for you 52 weeks a year.

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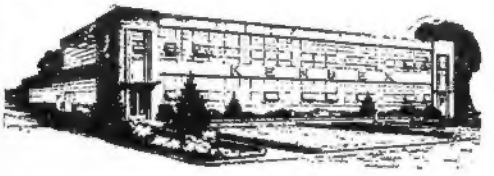

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SEND NO MONEY. Pay nothing now or later. No obligation. Not even a promise to return outfits. Simply write your name and address on a penny postcard and mail to us. We'll immediately rush you everything you need FREE and postage prepaid. WRITE TODAY!

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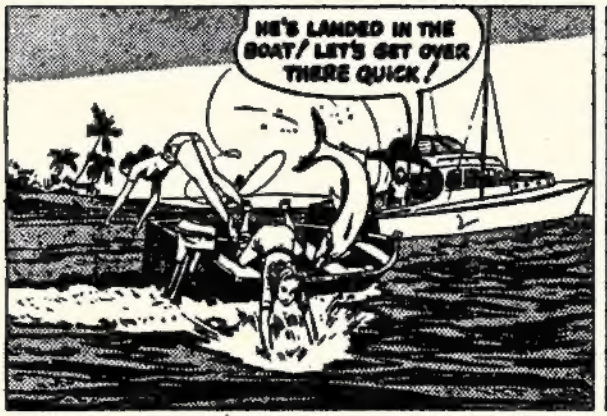
JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1951 Cover by Bill Wayne

A BLACK SOLITUDE . . . . . H. Russell Wakefield 14
The man and woman whose portraits hung on the wall had been dead for hundreds of years, but here time was trapped and couldn't move on.

THE MISSISSIPPI SAUCER . . . . . Frank Belknap Long 26
. . . armed with the great proud strength of the Shining One.

OLD MR. WILEY . . . . . Greye La Spina 37
Old Mr. Wiley had been dropping in nights to visit his great grandson—the nurse was certain of it. But old Mr. Wiley had been dead for over fifteen years.

EACH MAN KILLS . . . . . Victoria Glad 48
"I went to find Maria, to marry her. Instead, I murdered her—even after I had seen her dead in her lover's arms."

THE WHITE FEATHER HEX . . . . . Don Peterson 58
Along with the elements the Pennsylvania farmer had, since childhood, been exposed to the evils of hexerei.

DEAREST' . . . . . H. Beam Piper 68
He couldn't see her. She was only something in his mind. Yet her presence was real to him.

THE INVADERS . . . . . Benjamin Ferris 80
People were getting the idea that Dark Valley was living off the rest of the land; feeding on it like a parasite.

VERSE

REVENANT . . . . . Leah Bodine Drake 24

WEIRDITTIES OF SCIENCE . . . . . Bok 79

THE EYRIE 4

WEIRDISMS . . . . . Lee Brown Coye 67

WEIRD TALES CLUB 95

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178

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. Vol. 43, No. 3

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

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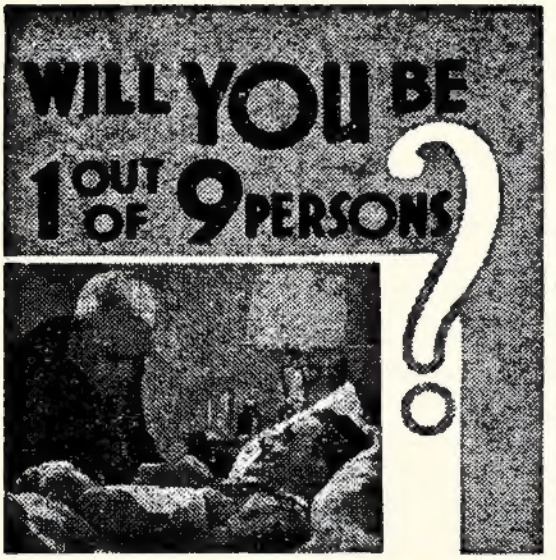

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The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, N. Y.

I wonder if, after reading Gordon MacCreagh's "The Hand of Saint Ury," G. L. Gillmore who has a letter in this January, 1951, issue, can still think that the various writers' (for WEIRD TALES*) reservoirs of sheer fictional terrors have run dry, or become temporarily arid?*

"The Hand of Saint Ury" was far and away the best of the past year! I started reading it one afternoon, with plenty of people around me. It took about half the story to reach the gripping details. Wisely, I laid aside the magazine to be read after dark when the rest of the family were in bed, and I could be undisturbed. It was worth staying up late to finish. Believe me! MacCreagh must be a genius! He omitted nothing. During the fight with the hand, Doakes is made to mention the "light flashes of beaten nerves!" How realistic. And the horrible treachery of "the 'and" in outwitting the dogs, the watchman, and in getting at Doakes' throat in the crypt. MacCreagh has thoroughly explored the possibilities of the tireless, remorseless, hateful filthy amputated hand as no one else has done.

Gillmore . . . reconsider!

Just rounding the track and coming into the home stretch, are a pair of seconds, which, if it weren't for "The Hand" . . . would be tied for first place. They are . . . Masterson's "The Fisherman at Crescent Beach," and "Scope" by Allison V. Harding.

(*Continued on page* 6)

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G. I. Bill gives you valuable training benefits. But time is running out. Act now to get N. R. I. training under G. I. Bill. Mail Coupon! Hurry!

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Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television sales and service shop or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. Today there are over 81,000,000 home and auto Radios. 2700 Broadcasting Stations are on the air. Aviation and Police Radios, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio are all expanding fields making more and better opportunities for servicing and communication technicians and FCC licensed operators.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

And think of the opportunities in Television! In 1949 almost 3,000,000 Television sets were sold. By 1954 authorities estimate 20,000,000 Television sets will be in use. 100 Television Stations are now operating, with experts predicting 1,000. Now is the time to get in line for success and a bright future in America's fast growing industry. Be a Radio-Television Technician.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

CHIEF ENGINEER, POLICE RADIO
"Soon after finishing the N.R.I. course, worked for servicing shop. Now I am Chief Engineer of two-way FM Police Radio installations."—E. W. DIXON-WIDDIS, Jacksonville, Illinois.

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"Am authorized serviceman for 8 large manufacturers and do servicing 7 dealers. N.R.I. has enabled me to build an enviable reputation in Television."—PAUL MILLER, Manseo, O.

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"Am tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Full back to N.R.I. text books often for installing Television set."—ROBERT DOHMEN, New Prague, Minnesota.

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Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lesson on Servicing; shows how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1BR1, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 37th Year.

Have Your Own Business

Many N.R.I. trained men start their own Radio-Television sales and service business without capital. Let me show you how you, too, can be your own boss, have a good income from your own shop.

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As part of my Servicing Course, you build this complete, powerful Radio Receiver that brings in local and distant stations. N.R.I. gives you ALL the Radio parts . . . speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, sockets, loop antenna, etc.

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As part of my Communications Course, I SEND YOU parts to build this low-power broadcasting transmitter. You learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many practical tests.

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1BR1
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television. Both FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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If you can show me how to make over $200.00 a week, I'll be your friend for life. Rush me complete details and free selling plan about amazing D-Frost-O-Matics.

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(*Continued from page 4*)

A close third is Derleth's "Something from Out There."

Your illustrators did both bad and good. The cover is good, but like Eberle's drawing for Frank Owen's story, was not related to the contents. Kennedy's work for "The Unwanted" is not really "weird." The census-taking girl is made to appear outre in this picture; she was quite normal. Rest of the illos were good, but we miss Lee Brown Coye.

Please, Mr. Editor, if you have the say-so, never let the publishers change the make-up of WEIRD TALES *to this modern semi-slick, impersonal, cold and lifeless ideal that others are going in for.*

Bob Barnett,
Carthage, Mo.

The Editor would like to assure Mr. Barnett that he has all the say-so as to what goes into the pages of WEIRD TALES. Especially this is noticeable when brickbats are flying.

●

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Reference: WEIRD TALES *for 1950. The two illustrations by Eberle for the stories "The Sixth Gargoyle" and "The Old Gentleman with the Scarlet Umbrella" are some of the finest work that I have seen in your publication in a long time.*

H. E. Norman,
Fort Bliss, Texas

●

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

I would like to compliment WEIRD TALES *for reviving "The Eyrie"; this department has always been an essential part of the magazine. WT continues to be my favorite magazine, barring none. And as long as you feature material by such writers as Allison Harding (who has developed into a truly grand authoress), Seabury Quinn (who, it seems, will never quit writing for WT, and good for that), August Derleth, H. R. Wakefield, Manly Wellman, Robert Bloch,*

(*Continued on page 8*)

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(Continued from page 6)

and Stephen Grendon, it will continue to be my pet periodical. However, I have noticed that one of your most competent writers, Carl Jacobi, has appeared infrequently of late in these pages. His stories have been consistently good, and rank among the best WT has published. I was gratified at the appearance of "The Spanish Camera" in a recent issue, and hope that Mr. Jacobi is getting back in stride.

Also, I miss Ray Bradbury immensely. Maestro Ray has apparently given up weird fiction and has advanced (or should I say deteriorated?) to science-fiction. He appears to be quite a success in that particular branch of fantasy.

In one recent issue, I noticed that one reader acclaims Robert Bloch's "The Cheaters" as being the finest thing to appear in WT since change in editorship. I am almost in whole-hearted agreement with that reader. His "The Weird Tailor" in the July, '50, issue wasn't bad either.

Gene Tipton
Johnson City, Tenn.

●

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

After nearly a ten-year abstinence (way back in the days when I was proud possessor of an eerie little membership card in the WEIRD TALES *Club!), I am again impelled to write a "letter to the editor."*

In those days I was extremely enthusiastic and wrote often to both you and other fans all over the world. Since then I have remained steadfastly enthusiastic but have given up the correspondence.

This time, however, I was primarily impelled to comment on one fine part of the January, '51, issue. It is an outstanding feature.

I am referring to the absolutely beautiful and unusual art work by Mr. J. R. Eberle. In the opinion of an artist and student, Mr. Eberle may take an enviable position ranking Finlay and Bok. And that is high praise indeed in this particular field!

"Criticisms are many, praises few," so I

(Continued on page 10)

. . . For the Well Trained Man in . . .

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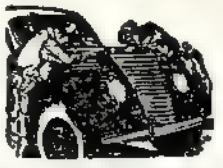

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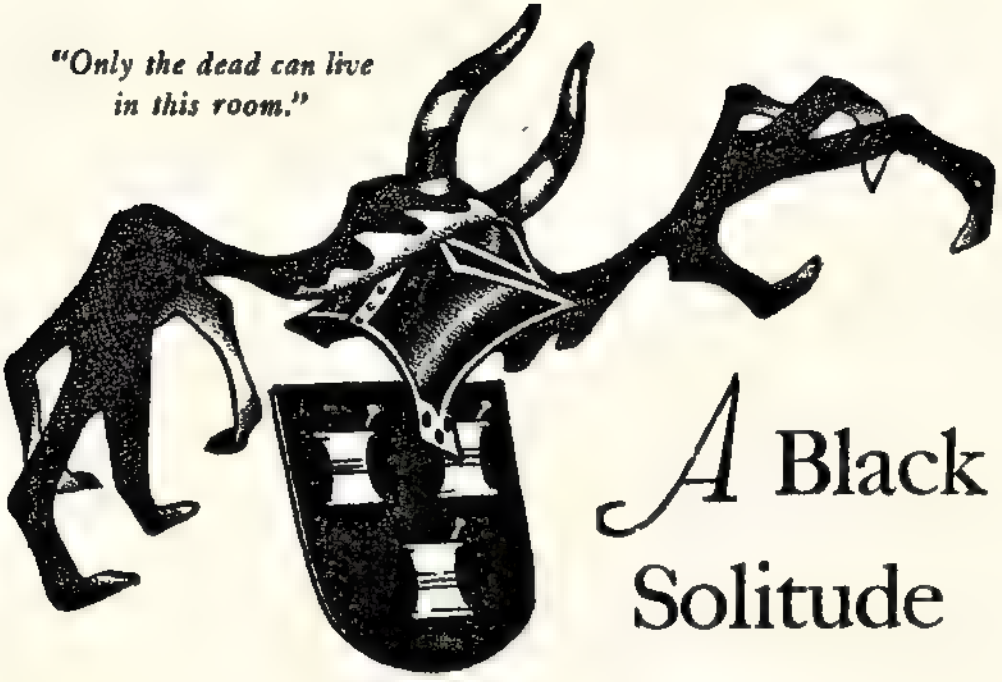
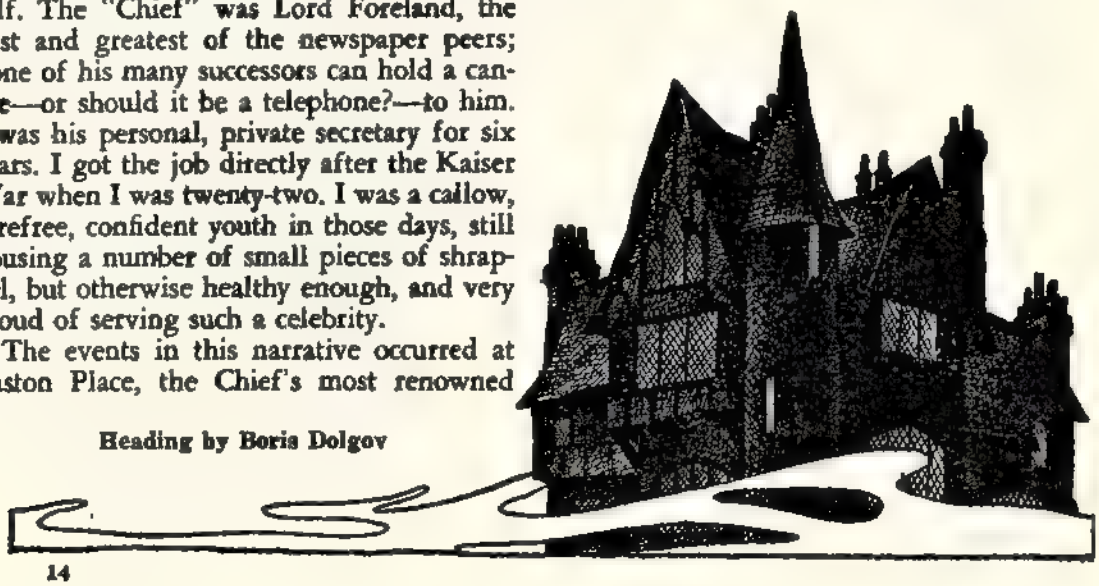


A Black Solitude

By H. Russell Wakefield

I HAVE no explanation of this story, in fact, one of my reasons for telling it lies in the hope that some reader of it may provide one. I rather dislike being left in such an elucidatory void. I got permission to tell it from Lady Foreland; she is sure the Chief would not have minded. I shall probably tell it very badly, for I am an organizer of writers by profession, not a writer myself. The "Chief" was Lord Foreland, the first and greatest of the newspaper peers; none of his many successors can hold a candle—or should it be a telephone?—to him. I was his personal, private secretary for six years. I got the job directly after the Kaiser War when I was twenty-two. I was a callow, carefree, confident youth in those days, still housing a number of small pieces of shrapnel, but otherwise healthy enough, and very proud of serving such a celebrity.

The events in this narrative occurred at Caston Place, the Chief's most renowned country house. This was a famous specimen of early Tudor manor house, in Surrey, charming rather than beautiful, perhaps; though never have I seen such exquisitely mellow brick. The grounds were unarguably lovely. The great lawn—finest turf in the world—lined by Lebanon cedars, the flower, rock, water and kitchen gardens, all show-



Heading by Boris Dolgov

pieces and deservedly so, the best private golf-course in the Islands, snipe in the water, meadows down by the strolling, serpentine Wear. Well, if I were a millionaire, that's the sort of cottage I would choose. The interior, too, after the Chief's purse had mated with "Ladyship's" taste, had been most delicately modernized without a trace of "vulgarized." I was there about thirty week-ends in the year and I grew to love it. It was a great old gentleman, an eternally young old gentleman and it died, like so many other gentlemen of my times, in the wars. And also, like many such gentlemen, it had a secret which died with it.

My little bedroom was almost at the end of the east wing. It had once been, I fancy, the dressing-room of the big bedroom next door to it. To my surprise I found that this big bedroom was never used, even when the most lavish house-parties came for the week-end. It was not kept locked, but no one ever slept there.

One day I went in and inspected it. By any standards I had known up till then it was a *vast* room, and somehow vaguely unprepossessing. It had very dark oak panelling and a great oak bed. Two full length portraits flanked the fireplace.

The owners of Caston had fallen on sufficiently mediocre days not to be able to afford to live in it, though the rent the Chief paid for it must have gone far to reconcile them to such exile. Portraits of their forebears—the majority third-rate daubs to be accurate—liberally littered the walls. The Chief told me there'd always been a "sticky" streak in the family (though the latest generation were tame enough) with a notorious name for cruelty, improvidence and various and versatile depravities. These portraits certainly, for the most part, bore this indictment out. They were a baleful-looking crew, men, women and children, and their decorative value exceptionally meager. But the two in the room, as I will call it from henceforth, struck, it seemed to me, a new and noxious low. They were man and wife, I suppose, and fitting mates. They were both in the middle forties, I should say, period, early Stuart, judging from their garb. The husband had a very nasty pair of close-set beady eyes and his lower lip—a family stigmata this—was fleshy, puffy and pouting, the lip of an insatiable and unscrupulous egoist and sensualist. He carried his head bunched forward and his chin down, as though staring hard at the artist and giving him the toughest piece of his mind. The lady was a blonde, and sufficient in herself to give blondes a bad name. She had the lightest blue eyes I ever saw in a face, almost toneless. They were big, too far apart and as hard staring as her spouse's. Her mouth was just one long, hard, thin line of scarlet. Her expression was ruthless and contemptuous, as though telling the painter he was an incompetent—which was true—and informing him it would be a case of "off with his head" if he didn't hurry up. I remember thinking that if he'd ever seen the color of his fee, he was lucky. When I

looked at them I found them staring back at me and I felt I would *not* let them stare me down. I thought how lowering it might be to find those four evil eyes on one when one woke up in the morning, and that it might not be too jocund to turn the light out knowing they were there. (In some frail moods it is difficult to differentiate entirely man and his effigy. And that goes, if you know what I mean, for *dead* men—and women—too.) These twain looked, if I may so put it, as though at any moment they might step down from their frames and beat me up.

WELL, here was a small mystery and I made up my mind to solve it. It wasn't as if Caston was over-supplied with bedrooms. Those old houses are smaller than they look, in this sense, that many of their rooms are, to our ideas, ludicrously large, and there are too few of them. I knew Ladyship could have put the room to very good purpose if she'd so chosen. Why didn't she so choose? It was puzzling. I was new to the job, and it was not part of it to ask possibly awkward domestic questions. So I waited my chance and presently it came.

One day, when I was on my own down at Caston making arrangements for a big staff party the Chief was throwing, I took a stroll round the grounds with Chumley, the butler and a great character. The very first time I stayed at Caston, the Chief sent for Chumley and in his presence said to me, "This is my butler, the best butler in England, and a very great rogue. Owing to his defalcations and the house property he has purchased therefrom, he is also a very rich man. No doubt eventually he will go to America, the devil, the spiritual home of the best British butlers. Never, my boy, let me catch you giving him a tip."

"Well, sir," I said, "*may he* give *me* one sometimes?" The Chief was in a good humor, luckily, and passed this rather saucy remark. In fact, he said it showed I had a promising eye to the main commercial chance. (After the Chief died he *did* go to America, and some years later he sent me his photograph seated at the wheel of a Rolls-Royce, a cigar in his mouth and an Alsatian sitting beside him. An eagle amongst doves!) Well, on this occasion we were strolling about on the lawn and I asked him, glancing up at its windows, why the room was never occupied. "His Lordship's brother, Sir Alfred, had an unpleasant experience there," he replied, "but please do not say I told you."

"What sort of experience?"

"I don't quite know, but he started screaming out one night and went straight back to London first thing in the morning. He never came here again and died very soon after."

"And it has never been used since?"

"Only on one occasion, sir; the editor of the *Evening Sentinel* slept there later on and he looked very *green* at breakfast the next morning. I think he must have said something to his Lordship, for he gave me orders the room wasn't to be used again."

"Was that Mr. Spenland, the present editor?"

"No, sir, Mr. Cocks, the former editor. He also died soon—within a week, as I remember it."

"Odd, Chumley!"

"Possibly, sir, but keep what I've told you under your hat, if I may use that expression. I made some inquiries in the village and they weren't surprised at all. Until his Lordship took the house the end of that wing was blocked up and never used."

"Why?"

"Hard to say, sir. Not considered lucky, I gathered."

"That's nice for me, sleeping there!"

"Have you been bothered, sir?"

"I don't think so. I get some funny dreams, but that's the food and drink, I expect. Not what I'm used to. But how d'you mean, not lucky?"

"They kept a tight mouth about that, but Morton, the game-keeper, told me there's supposed to be somebody or something still living on in that room."

"*What* a yarn!"

"Yes, sir," agreed Chumley doubtfully. "None of the maids will go in there alone after dark."

"Just because they've heard tales about it!"

"I suppose so, though one of them got a fright some years back. Anyway, don't tell his Lordship I said anything. He's a bit touchy about it; he likes all his possessions to be *perfect.*" A very shrewd remark!

"No, all right," I promised, and we resumed discussing the business of the hour.

THAT night, just before going to bed, I paid a visit to the room. I had been busy with mundane and concrete matters. I had dined well, so it was with a very disdainful and nonchalant air that I climbed the stairs. At once, it is no use denying it, my psychic outlook changed. I suddenly realized that Caston when empty, was a very quiet, brooding place, and that I had never quite liked being alone in it, it was a bit "much" overpowering for a "singleton."

The weather had soured during the evening, clouding over with a falling glass and a fitful rising summer wind. My little enclave at the end of the passage seemed peculiarly aloof and dispiriting. Chumley's enigmatic remarks recurred to me with some force at that moment and with a heightened significance. I thought of those two dead men, the one who'd screamed and the other who'd looked "green"—what a word!—at breakfast. However, you know the feeling. I didn't want to open that door, and yet I knew if I didn't I should have kicked myself for a craven and never—or at least not for a long time—got it out of my system. My year at the War had taught me that each time one funks one finds it harder not to do it next time. All of which may sound much ado about precious little, but you weren't standing facing that door at midnight on July 20th, 1923! Well, with a small whistle of defiance I turned the handle of that door and flipped on the lights. Anti-climax, of course! Just a huge old room like any other of its kind. And yet was it quite normal? Well, there was that commonplace feeling everyone has experienced that someone had been in there a moment before, that the air was still warm from that someone's presence; perhaps rather more than that; perhaps, quite absurd, of course, that one was being observed by someone unseen. My eyes ran round the room swiftly and then settled on those criminal types athwart the fireplace. They had their eyes on me pretty starkly. "Avaunt!" they seemed to be saying, or whatever was the contemporary phrase for "Beat it!" I stared back at them. "Not till I'm ready!" I replied out loud in a would-be jocular way. There was an odd echo in that room. It seemed to swing round the walls and come back to hit me in the face. Then I heard a scraping noise from the chimney, Jack-daws nesting in it, no doubt second-brood; my voice had disturbed their slumbers. I moved further into the room. The rustling in the chimney grew louder. "Well, good night, all!" I said facetiously, but there was no echo. I tried again; no echo at all. That was a puzzle. I shifted my position and said good night to them once more. This time the echo nearly blew my head off and something tapped three times on one of the windows. I suddenly felt that uncontrollable atavistic dread of ambush and glanced sharply round behind my back. "I'm not afraid of you," I said loudly. "Do your worst!" But somehow I knew it was time to go. I paced back slowly and deliberately, turned out the light, banged the door and went to bed.

What a history that room must have had, I thought, to have been blocked off from the world like that for years. And now the ban was up once more. Strong medicine there of some sort! What sort? And there was only some thin panelling and plaster between me and it. I kept my ears pricked, for I was a bit on edge, my subconscious was alert and receptive.

I went to bed and presently to sleep. Sometime in the night I awoke hearing something, which, my subconscious told me, I had heard several times before, but now, *consciously* for the first time; it was a kind of *crack* like the flipping of giant fingers, twice repeated. A displeasing, staccato, urgent and peremptory sound, the source of which I quite failed to trace.

Now the Chief, like most self-made men, especially in his profession, had some queer "old friends," many of whom had been associated with him in his days of

struggle, but had, for the most part, been left far behind in the success marathon. The Chief had not a trace of snobbery about these; so long as he liked them and they amused him they remained his friends, rich or poor, successes or duds and, in several cases, reputable or not. Perhaps the queerest of all these was one, Apuleius Charlton. This person was generally deemed a very dubious type and a complete back-number, the last belated survivor of the Mauve decade, with a withered green carnation in his frayed buttonhole and trailing thin clouds of obsolete diabolism. Incidentally, he belonged to a cadet branch of a very "old family." As a sinister monster of depravity I found him sheer Disney and so did the Chief, but he had unarguably superior brains, a kind of charm, and an ebullient personality. In fact, *personality* is quite too flaccid a word; he was *sui generis,* the sole member of his species. There was a strong tinge of Casanova about him; he shared his brazen candor, occasional brilliant insight, his refusal to accept the silly laws of God and man as binding upon himself, his essential spiritual loneliness. He was a big hefty creature, an athlete by right of birth, with a huge domed head, large watery eyes and jet-black hair, the fringe of which he tortured into twin spiral locks. Between them was a small, red magical mark, a three-pronged "moon" swastika. He had been everywhere in the world, I think, and his travel tales were legion and sensational and owing something, no doubt, to an ebullient imagination. He was then barred from a number of countries, rather unhumorously, for while his bark was Cerberian, his bite was vastly over-rated. He had, no doubt, acquired certain monies by various modes of false pretenses, but never a sizable hoard; and those he diddled were, I am sure, consummate mugs who just asked to be "taken." He said so himself and I believed him.

HE HAD written copiously on many subjects with an air of complete confidence and authority, and in his youth had been a goodish minor poet of the erotic, adjectival Swinburne school, but somehow he never had any real money. That was his incurable malady. There are a number of such vagrant oddities in the world, lone wolves, or rather, I think, they remind me of great ostracized, solitary birds, forever winging their way fearlessly and hopefully from one barren place to another, wiry, wary, and shunned by the timorous and "respectable" flock. He had written stuff for the Chief's publications before his name became so odoriferous, climbed with him in several parts of the world, for he was a brilliant and scientific mountaineer, and gone with him on esoteric drinking bouts in the wine countries, for he knew his epicurean tipples and taught the Chief to judge a vintage. Lastly, and immensely most important to himself, he was a magician with a cult or mystery of his very own invention and a small band of very odd initiates indeed. Hence the swastika and much ponderous and eleusinian jewelry on convenient parts of his person, including a perfectly superb jade ring. I know jade and this piece was incomparably fine. (You will hear of it again.) For this aspect of his ego the Chief, not necessarily rightly, expressed the most caustic contempt, telling him the only reason why he and his rival Merlins and Fingals shrouded their doings in veils of secrecy—and this went for Masons, Buffaloes, Elks, and all other mumbo-jumbo practitioners—was that they had nothing to conceal except the most puerile and humiliating drivel worthy of their Woolworth regalia, and they were ashamed to disclose such infantile lucubrations and primitive piffle. All the same some people were definitely scared of old Apuleius, and no doubt he had a formidable and impressive side. He was sixty odd at this time and very well preserved in spite of his hard boozing, addiction to drugs and sexual fervor, for it was alleged that joy-maidens or Hierodoules were well represented in his mystic entourage. (If I were a Merlin, they would be in mine!)

Of course he never figured in house parties, but the Chief had him down to Caston now and again and, I know, sent him a most welcome cheque at regular intervals.

In November of this same year, the Chief and his Lady went away for a

month's holiday to the Riviera, and just before he met old Apuleius in the street looking a bit down at heel and told him he could doss down at Caston while he was away, that I would look after him, and that the cellar was at his disposal, but that this invitation did *not* extend to his coterie, particularly the Hierodoules! Poor Apuleius leaped at this timely and handsome offer and the day after the Chief's departure he appeared at the house bearing his invariable baggage, one small, dejected cardboard suitcase—at least, it looked like cardboard. I was on holiday, too, or rather half-holiday, for I got six to a dozen telegrams a day from the Chief and had made a rash promise to begin the cataloguing of his library. (I may say he had two other secretaries to do the donkey-work.) But I had plenty of spare time to shoot, golf and catch some of the nice little trout in the stream. So there were old Apuleius and I almost alone for a month and all the best at our disposal. He treated me always with some pleasing but quite unnecessary deference, for I was the Czar's little shadow and a lad worth cultivating. Besides he liked me a little and he didn't like anyone very much. I resolved covertly to examine this psychological freak, because I never could decide how much of a charlatan he was and how much he believed in his own bunkum. Such characters are very dark little forests and it's a job to blaze any sort of trail through them.

He arrived, very sensibly, just in time for lunch and did himself extremely well. He was in great spirits and splendid form talking with vast verve and rather above my jejune head. I quite forget what it was all about. He slept for a while after lunch and then began a prolonged prowl around the establishment, which he had never properly inspected before. I went with him, for the unworthy reason that the house was full of small, highly-saleable articles and he had a reputation for sometimes confusing meum with tuum when confronted with such. At length we reached my little enclave and there facing him was the room. "What's that?" he asked, staring hard at the door. "Oh, just a bedroom," I replied. Suddenly he moved forward quickly, opened the door, and drew a quick, dramatic breath. At once he seemed transformed. You have seen the life come to a drowsy cat's eyes when it hears the rustle of a mouse. You may have noted the changed demeanor of some oafish and lugubrious athlete when he spies a football or a bag of golf clubs. Just such a metamorphosis occurred in Apuleius when he opened that door. He became intent, absorbed, *professional*. I felt compensatingly insignificant and meager.

"Nobody sleeps here?" he said.

"No," I replied.

"Not twice, anyway," he said sharply.

"Why?" I asked.

HE WENT up to the criminal types and scrutinized them carefully. And then he pointed out to me some things I had not noticed before, a tiny figure of a hare with a human and very repulsive face at the right-hand side of the gentleman, a crescent moon with something enigmatic peering out between its horns on the same side of the lady. "As I expected," he observed in his most impressive manner, and left it at that.

"Well, what about it?" I asked impatiently.

"That would take rather a long time to explain, my dear Pelham," he replied, "and with all respect, I doubt if you would ever quite understand. Let me just say this. Such places as these are as rare as they are perilous. In a sense this is a *timeless* place. What once happened here didn't change, didn't pass on, it was *crystallized*. What happened herein eternally repeats itself. Here time, as it were, was trapped and can't move on. Man is life and life is change so such places are deadly to man. If man cannot change, he dies. Death is the end of a stage in a certain process of change. Only the dead can live in this room."

"And do they?" I asked, bemused by this rigamarole.

"In a sense, yes."

This effusion didn't commend itself to me. (Besides it was still daylight.) I countered with vivacity. "Well," I said, "you may be right, but the moment anyone begins philosophizing about time I get a bellyache. It is one of the prevailing infirmities

of third-rate minds. Personally I believe it to be no more a genuine mystery than say, money, with which it is vulgarly identified. All this pother about both is due to a confusion of thought based on a confusion of terms. The word 'time' is habitually used in about sixteen different senses. If I were asked to define metaphysics, I should describe it as an acrimonious and sterile controversy about the connotation of certain abstract terms. But I'll give you this, the room has a bad name." (There was no getting round that, and he'd instantly spotted it. How?)

"It should not even be *entered* after dark," he said, "save by those who—well—understand it and enter it fore-armed."

"You say something happened here and eternally reacts itself. What?"

"Those two," he replied, pointing to the types, "made an experiment which in a sense succeeded."

"And that was?"

"Once again I am in a difficulty. These dark territories are such new ground to you. You must understand there are no such entities as good and evil, there are merely forces, some beneficent, some injurious, indeed, fatal, to man. He exists precariously poised between these forces. Those two, as it were, allied themselves with the forces noxious to man; what used to be called selling oneself to the devil. These things are beyond you, my dear Pelham, and I should not pursue them. It is one of the oldest mysteries of the world, the idea that if one can become all evil, drink the soma of the fiend, one immortalizes oneself; one becomes impervious to change and so to death. Actually, it is not so. It cannot be done. One cannot defeat death, but one can become what is loosely called an evil spirit, a focus for a concentration of destructive energy, and, in that limited sense, undying."

"Of course, you're right, that's all cuneiform to me," I replied staring up at the ambitious pair. "But what's the result? What happens then?"

"Well, those two made that attempt. I can tell that for certain reasons, and achieved that limited success. They practised every conceivable wicked and unspeakable thing. This room was their laboratory, their torture-chamber; it reeks of it. When they died, they became chained to this room. It is their *Hell,* if you like so to put it."

"In what state are they?" I asked not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "I mean are they conscious? Do they know, for example, you are discussing them?"

"To begin with 'they' is a misnomer. 'They' are *one;* male and female principles have been fused and the feminine predominates, for it is the more primitive, potent and dangerous. The resultant 'It' is not conscious in our sense of the word, it has no illusion of *will.* It is a state we cannot understand and so cannot describe. It has been absorbed into the very soul of that power which is inimicable to man and is endowed with its venom. But it cannot roam; it is anchored to this room. To destroy man is It's delight. In that It finds It's *orgasm.* What occurs in this room is the eternal generation, condensation and release of murderous energy. After dark, for it cannot be released in daylight, this whole room will be soaked in and embued with that energy."

"How does It destroy?"

"It can do so simply by fear and fear can kill. Once in India I passed through a cholera-infected area. The very road was thick with bodies, but more of them had died from sheer fear than the disease. It would kill *you* by fear, but It could not so kill me. It would have to—well—*overpower* me to destroy me. I am coming here tonight."

"I shouldn't!" I said hastily. "I'm not sure the Chief would permit it. If anything happened to you, he'd be furious."

"It will not. I know the only safeguards against and antidotes to these forces. So leave me now. I will start to prepare my defenses. I will see you at dinner."

So I went off to do some work, completely baffled and somewhat uneasy in mind.

AT DINNER Apuleius was preoccupied and portentous, and actually drank nothing but water, a sure sign he was taking life seriously. I was preoccupied too. I knew perfectly well the Chief would have shoved down a formidable foot on the whole thing,

but I wasn't the Chief, Apuleius had been given the run of the house and I had no authority to control his movements within it. All the same, looking back on it, I think I acted feebly and that I should have exercised a veto however arbitrary, and kept him out of that room that night. All I did was to employ persuasion, and quite ineffectually. "My dear Pelham," he propounded, "this is a challenge I must accept. I have devoted much of my life to this crusade of safeguarding man from those black forces which, unknown to the blind and unpercipient, are forever striving and with ever increasing success to break down his resistance and shatter him. If I fully succeed tonight I shall cleanse that room and make it harmless, white and habitable again. I shall be very thankful if I can do the Chief this service."

"But supposing they are too strong for you?" I protested. "That energy may be more virulent and vicious than you reckon on."

"That is a risk I must take. So far I have always conquered them, and I can rally mighty forces to my aid. In this sign,"—and he touched the swastika on his forehead—"I shall conquer once again. Have no fears."

I must say he looked impressive, exalted, when he said this.

After dinner he again disappeared for a while and I tried to do some more work, but of all jobs cataloguing a library is the most soporific. I dozed off and presently woke to find him standing before me. He had repainted the swastika, which gleamed somberly.

"I am ready," he declared, "and now I will rest for a while. I will enter that room at five minutes to midnight."

"What kind of ordeal do you think awaits you?" I asked. "Or do you mind telling me?"

"The moment I enter that room I shall pronounce certain formulae, what you would loosely call incantations. I shall then, to use a military metaphor, entrench myself within a defensive ring and concentrate my

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whole spirit on rallying to my side the powers of white, the forces of salvation. They will come to me. Already the black forces will be concentrating upon me, the tension will increase every moment. Sometime the black will strike and the white will lash back, the grapple will be joined. When those dark forces have done their worst and been repelled, white will have been reestablished in that room, the sting of evil, of destruction and of black will have been drawn. I shall be exhausted and soon pass into a coma from which I shall awake refreshed, hale and with added powers. And then we will enjoy our holiday together, my dear Pelham, and drink deep, having cleansed this lovely house of its ancient doom."

"I wish I could be with you in that struggle," I said doubtfully.

"It is unthinkable," he replied forcibly. "It has taken me forty years to learn how to conduct this fearful quarrel. I could not extend that which protects me to you. You would be inevitably destroyed."

"Just killed?" I asked repressing a nervous and blasphemous itch to laugh.

"More than that, though that for certain. You might never be seen again."

Now, I will be frank, it did seem to me that already there was a tension, a sense of malaise in that great room where we were sitting. The wind had risen to half-a-gale and the rain had come with it. The old house seemed like a ship heaving at its moorings. The windows shook, the curtains stirred, the wind went roaring by. And really for the first time I knew old Apuleius to be a strange and formidable fellow and no figure of fun, and that that shining emblem on his brow might have more than a derisory significance. I grew very restless, the current stirring my nerves seemed to have had its voltage raised. I should have liked to have gone out into that storm and walked the tension down. Odd, distorting little pictures formed and vanished in my mind's eye; masks of evil, a flaming body hurtling through the sky, a ring of sultry fire, a dark stream of birds, a bloody sword. I shook myself and fetched a drink. Apuleius was sitting down now, motionless, his chin on his breast, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. And presently the clock chimed three times, it was a quarter to midnight.

"No drink, Apuleius?" I asked, to break the silence.

"No," he replied. "Alcohol relaxes, and I require the utmost stiffening of my spirit. If I had known what was before me I would not have drunk at lunch."

"Then put it off till you've prepared yourself properly!"

"No," he replied, "it must be tonight."

"Look here," I urged, "you realize there will only be a thin wall between us. If you're in any trouble bang on that wall and I'll come fighting."

"Have no fear," he said, "all will be well."

"Yes, but if it isn't will you bang on that wall?"

"In the last extremity I will, but it will not be necessary. And now the time has come."

WE GOT up together. I took the tantalus of whiskey with me and a syphon. I had no intention of sleeping and I felt like some Scotch courage. The gale was now at its height, screaming wickedly round the house; a fit night for black and white, I thought, as we mounted the lightly creaking stairs. We parted without a word at the door of my room and Apuleius went on. Just before he opened that door he raised himself to his full height, touched the mark on his forehead, turned the handle and strode in. To this day I can see him there in my mind's eye as clearly as I did twenty-three long years ago. Then he disappeared, and I went in and closed my door. I sat down in an armchair, knocked back a big drink and tried to read. But I was half-listening all the time and couldn't concentrate. What was happening on the other side of that thin wall? I cursed the wind which waxed and waxed in venom drowning all small sounds. I could hear their straining timber roar as the great cedars fought the gale. The room seemed charged with a heightening tension. I had felt something like it before in the dynamo room of a great power station,

when those smooth spinning cylinders seemed to charge and shake the air with the huge power they so nonchalantly and quietly engendered, a power that in its essence remains a mighty mystery to this day.

I tried to visualize what Apuleius was doing. Sitting inside his magic circle, I supposed, murmuring his protective runes, straining to keep back that which strove to pass the barrier. I concentrated all my will upon it and presently I had the strangest illusion of my life. It was as though I *was* seeing into that room, as though the wall had become almost transparent and I was gazing through its thinning veil. Apuleius was sitting there in the middle of the room surrounded by a faintly illuminated ring. His eyes were staring, his face contorted into an odious rixus, his mouth moving convulsively. On the carpet just outside the ring huge shadows were crouching, other shadows of dubious and daunting shape were leaning down the walls. All seemed to have their heads pointing at him. All the time the lighted ring grew slowly dimmer. Suddenly there came, repeated over and over again, that horrid cracking of giant fingers, the lights in my room flickered, reddened and sparked. And then there was a dazzling flash of lightning and a blast of thunder which went roaring down the gale. I could stand no more and leapt to my feet.

SUDDENLY I heard Apuleius scream, once quickly, the second a piercing, drawn-out cry of agony. And then came a frenzied beating on the wall. I dashed out into the passage and flung open the door of the room. It was dimly lit, it was quiet, it was empty, the only movement, the slight stirring of the long, dark window curtains. I ran along to his room. Save for the little cardboard suitcase it was empty too. I shouted for him until Chumley came to investigate whether I had really gone crazy, or was merely very tight. He was wearing, I noted, a mink-collared dressing-gown over a pair of the Chief's most scintillating monogrammed silk pajamas.

And on that mildly farcical note I will end the story of that night. For Apuleius was never seen again. Of course, most of the few people who cared in the least whether he was alive or dead believed he'd done a bunk for reasons not unconnected with the constabulary. He was soon forgotten for he had long ceased to hit even the tiniest headlines. He had disappeared before and now he'd done it again. Good riddance! When the Chief heard my story he flew into a considerable fury though not with me, for he was a fair man and agreed it was not my function to control his guest and a man more than twice my own age. He wanted to believe the done-a-bunk theory naturally enough, but he realized it was dead against the weight of evidence. He had the room locked up and gave orders no one was to enter it without his or Ladyship's permission in the future.

The years passed and so presently did the Chief, no doubt to put some ginger into celestial or infernal journalism. I got a very nice job in his organization for life, I hoped, but then came the war and I transferred my talents temporarily to the M. O. I. In 1941 I was for a time bomb-jolly through being flung out of bed and hard up against a wall when my Kensington house was next door to a direct hit.

I had still kept in touch with Ladyship, then living very sensibly in a safe area, and one morning in June, 1944, she rang me up to say she had just heard Caston had been damaged by a fly-bomb and would I go down and see what had happened.

Poor sweet old place! The doodle had dived clap in the middle of the courtyard which had, of course, enclosed the blast—and that was that. Those Tudor houses were lightly built of delicate brick and lots of glass, so Caston was no more. Center block pulverized, right wing still collapsing by stages when I arrived. My old left wing just a great mountain of debris, bricks, beds, furniture, pictures, clothes—an incredible chaos spangled everywhere with that lovely old glass. The rescue squads were digging in the center wing for the bodies of the caretaker and his wife. A bulldozer and cranes rolled up while I was there. I climbed up the monstrous and pathetic pile feeling sad and full of memories. On the summit I picked up a piece of canvas and, turning it

over, found I was being regarded by the palest eyes which ever stared from a woman's face above a long, thin streak of scarlet. I threw it down again, *that* was not the sort of souvenir I relished. As I did so, I saw something glitter from between two broken bricks. I pulled it out and there was a sea-green jade ring on the splintered bone of a fleshless finger. I got the rescue men to dig around there, but we found nothing more.

That ring is on the desk beside me as I write these words. It is lovely beyond all telling. How it happened to be where I found it is, as I have told you, a matter for you to decide.

—Revenant—

by Leah Bodine Drake

NOW up the shore
The ripples slide;
The full moon pulls
The haunted tide,

The lamp leaps up
In the cottage pane,
And I am up
From the depths again,

Wild with sorrow,
My spirit beats
Up-wind to where
The sea-sand meets

The darker soil
Of furrowed land,
Where the little church
And the gravestones stand.

I know one headstone
White and cold,
Whose carven lie
States through the mold:

"God rest our darling
Drowned at sea."
The calm earth-grave
Holds none of me!

Even my spirit
Cannot stay
Where the graveyard grasses
Bend like spray.

For the jealous sea
Calls back its own,
Though the warm earth calls
To the sea-held bone,

And there is no rest
In the old, kind ground
For the bones unblest
Of one self-drowned!

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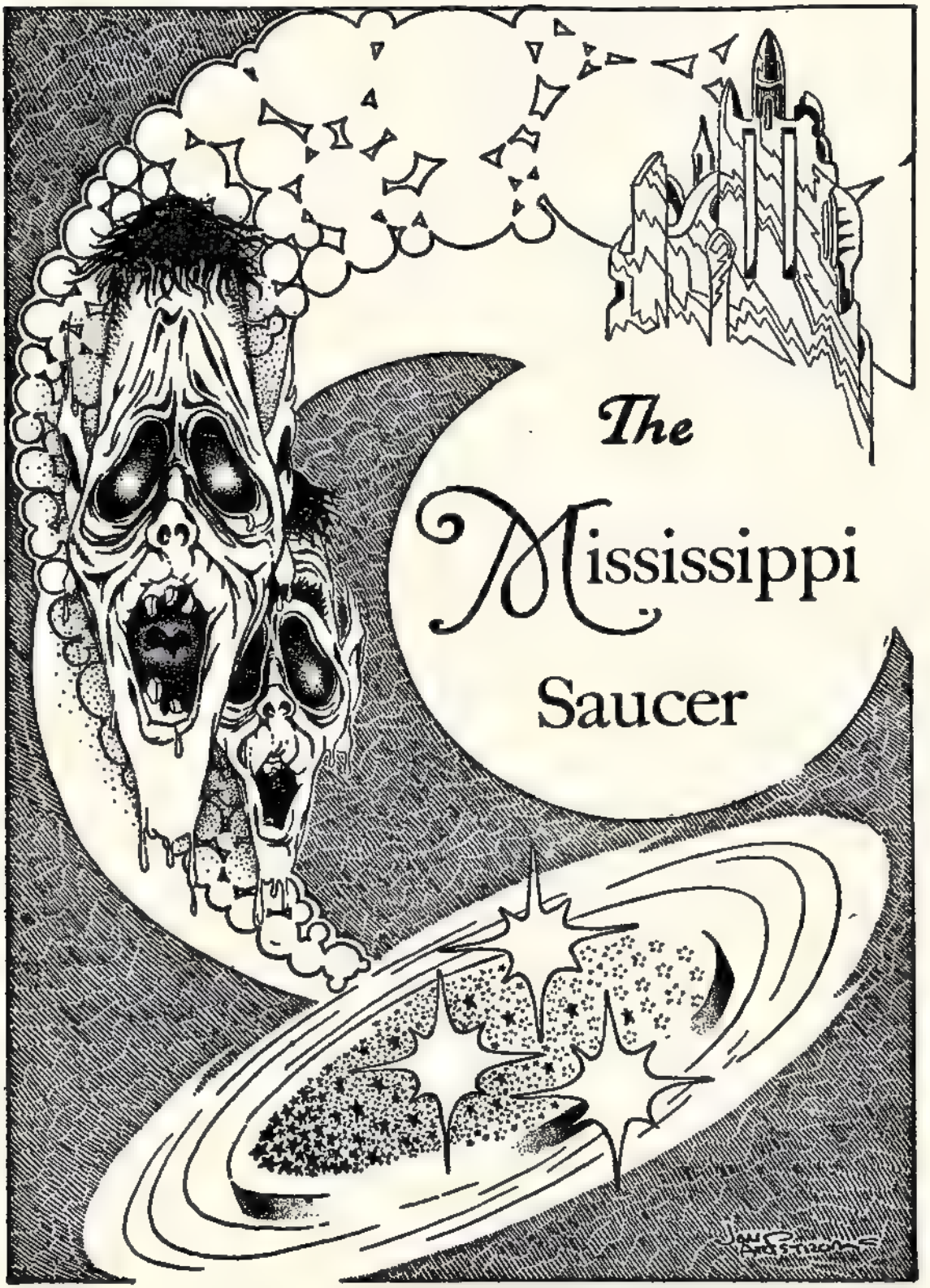


The Mississippi Saucer

Heading by Jon Arfstrom

By Frank Belknap Long

JIMMY watched the *Natchez Belle* draw near, a shining eagerness in his stare. He stood on the deck of the shantyboat, his toes sticking out of his socks, his heart knocking against his ribs. Straight down the river the big packet boat came, purpling the water with its shadow, its smokestacks belching soot.

Jimmy had a wild talent for collecting things. He knew exactly how to infuriate the captains without sticking out his neck. Up and down the Father of Waters, from the bayous of Louisiana to the Great Sandy other little shantyboat boys envied Jimmy and tried hard to imitate him.

But Jimmy had a very special gift, a genius for pantomime. He'd wait until there was a glimmer of red flame on the river and small objects stood out with a startling clarity. Then he'd go into his act.

Nothing upset the captains quite so much as Jimmy's habit of holding a big, croaking bullfrog up by its legs as the riverboats went steaming past. It was a surefire way of reminding the captains that men and frogs were brothers under the skin. The puffed-out throat of the frog told the captains exactly what Jimmy thought of their cheek.

Jimmy refrained from making faces, or sticking out his tongue at the grinning roustabouts. It was the frog that did the trick.

In the still dawn things came sailing Jimmy's way, hurled by captains with a twinkle of repressed merriment dancing in eyes that were kindlier and more tolerant than Jimmy dreamed.

Just because shantyboat folk had no right to insult the riverboats Jimmy had collected forty empty tobacco tins, a down-at-heels shoe, a Sears Roebuck catalogue and—more rolled up newspapers than Jimmy could ever read.

Jimmy could read, of course. No matter how badly Uncle Al needed a new pair of shoes, Jimmy's education came first. So Jimmy had spent six winters ashore in a first-class grammar school, his books paid for out of Uncle Al's "New Orleans" money.

Uncle Al, blowing on a vinegar jug and making sweet music, the holes in his socks much bigger than the holes in Jimmy's socks. Uncle Al shaking his head and saying sadly, "Some day, young fella, I ain't gonna sit here harmonizing. No siree! I'm gonna buy myself a brand new store suit, trade in this here jig jug for a big round banjo, and hie myself off to the Mardi Gras. Ain't too old thataway to git a little fun out of life, young fella!"

Poor old Uncle Al. The money he'd saved up for the Mardi Gras never seemed to stretch far enough. There was enough kindness in him to stretch like a rainbow over the bayous and the river forests of sweet, rustling pine for as far as the eye could see. Enough kindness to wrap all of Jimmy's life in a glow, and the life of Jimmy's sister as well.

Jimmy's parents had died of winter pneumonia too soon to appreciate Uncle Al. But up and down the river everyone knew that Uncle Al was a great man.

ENEMIES? Well, sure, all great men made enemies, didn't they?

The Harmon brothers were downright sinful about carrying their feuding meanness right up to the doorstep of Uncle Al, if it could be said that a man living in a shantyboat had a doorstep.

Uncle Al made big catches and the Harmon brothers never seemed to have any luck. So, long before Jimmy was old enough to understand how corrosive envy could be the Harmon brothers had started feuding with Uncle Al.

"Jimmy, here comes the *Natchez Belle*! Uncle Al says for you to get him a newspaper. The newspaper you got him yesterday he couldn't read no-ways. It was soaking wet!"

Jimmy turned to glower at his sister. Up and down the river Pigtail Anne was known as a tomboy, but she wasn't—no-ways. She

was Jimmy's little sister. That meant Jimmy was the man in the family, and wore the pants, and nothing Pigtail said or did could change that for one minute.

"Don't yell at me!" Jimmy complained. "How can I get Captain Simmons mad if you get me mad first? Have a heart, will you?"

But Pigtail Anne refused to budge. Even when the *Natchez Belle* loomed so close to the shantyboat that it blotted out the sky she continued to crowd her brother, preventing him from holding up the frog and making Captain Simmons squirm.

But Jimmy got the newspaper anyway. Captain Simmons had a keen insight into tomboy psychology, and from the bridge of the *Natchez Belle* he could see that Pigtail was making life miserable for Jimmy.

True—Jimmy had no respect for packet boats and deserved a good trouncing. But what a scrapper the lad was! Never let it be said that in a struggle between the sexes the men of the river did not stand shoulder to shoulder.

The paper came sailing over the shining brown water like a white-bellied buffalo cat shot from a sling.

Pigtail grabbed it before Jimmy could give her a shove. Calmly she unwrapped it, her chin tilted in bellicose defiance.

As the *Natchez Belle* dwindled around a lazy, cypress-shadowed bend Pigtail Anne became a superior being, wrapped in a cosmopolitan aura. A wide-eyed little girl on a swaying deck, the great outside world rushing straight toward her from all directions.

Pigtail could take that world in her stride. She liked the fashion page best, but she was not above clicking her tongue at everything in the paper.

"Kidnap plot linked to airliner crash killing fifty," she read. "Red Sox blank Yanks! Congress sits today, vowing vengeance! Million dollar heiress elopes with a clerk! Court lets dog pick owner! Girl of eight kills her brother in accidental shooting!"

"I ought to push your face right down in the mud," Jimmy muttered.

"Don't you dare! I've a right to see what's going on in the world!"

"You said the paper was for Uncle Al!"

"It is—when I get finished with it."

Jimmy started to take hold of his sister's wrist and pry the paper from her clasp. Only started—for as Pigtail wriggled back sunlight fell on a shadowed part of the paper which drew Jimmy's gaze as sunlight draws dew.

Exciting wasn't the word for the headline. It seemed to blaze out of the page at Jimmy as he stared, his chin nudging Pigtail's shoulder.

NEW FLYING MONSTER REPORTED BLAZING GULF STATE SKIES

Jimmy snatched the paper and backed away from Pigtail, his eyes glued to the headline.

HE WAS kind to his sister, however. He read the news item aloud, if an account so startling could be called an item. To Jimmy it seemed more like a dazzling burst of light in the sky.

"A New Orleans resident reported today that he saw a big bright object 'roundish like a disk' flying north, against the wind. 'It was all lighted up from inside!' the observer stated. 'As far as I could tell there were no signs of life aboard the thing. It was much bigger than any of the flying saucers previously reported!' "

"People keep seeing them!" Jimmy muttered, after a pause. "Nobody knows where they come from! Saucers flying through the sky, high up at night. In the daytime, too! Maybe we're being *watched*, Pigtail!"

"Watched? Jimmy, what do you mean? What you talking about?"

Jimmy stared at his sister, the paper jiggling in his clasp. "It's way over your head, Pigtail!" he said sympathetically. "I'll prove it! What's a planet?"

"A star in the sky, you dope!" Pigtail almost screamed. "Wait'll Uncle Al hears what a meanie you are. If I wasn't your sister you wouldn't dare grab a paper that doesn't belong to you."

Jimmy refused to be enraged. "A planet's not a star, Pigtail," he said patiently. "A star's a big ball of fire like the sun. A planet is small and cool, like the Earth. Some of the planets may even have people on them. Not people like us, but people all the same. Maybe we're just frogs to them!"

"You're crazy, Jimmy! Crazy, crazy, you hear?"

Jimmy started to reply, then shut his mouth tight. Big waves were nothing new in the wake of steamboats, but the shantyboat wasn't just riding a swell. It was swaying and rocking like a floating barrel in the kind of blow Shantyboaters dreaded worse than the thought of dying.

Jimmy knew that a big blow could come up fast. Straight down from the sky in gusts, from all directions, banging against the boat like a drunken roustabout, slamming doors, tearing away mooring planks.

THE river could rise fast too. Under the lashing of a hurricane blowing up from the gulf the river could lift a shantyboat right out of the water, and smash it to smithereens against a tree.

But now the blow was coming from just one part of the sky. A funnel of wind was churning the river into a white froth and raising big swells directly offshore. But the river wasn't rising and the sun was shining in a clear sky.

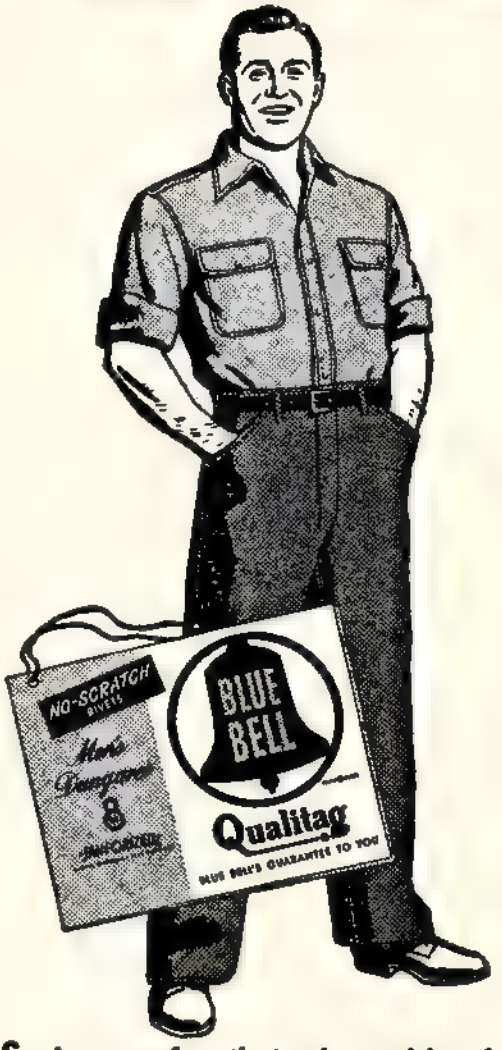
Jimmy knew a dangerous floodwater storm when he saw one. The sky had to be dark with rain, and you had to feel scared, in fear of drowning.

Jimmy was scared, all right. That part of it rang true. But a hollow, sick feeling in his chest couldn't mean anything by itself, he told himself fiercely.

Pigtail Anne saw the disk before Jimmy did. She screamed and pointed skyward, her twin braids standing straight out in the wind like the ropes on a bale of cotton, when smokestacks collapse and a savage howling sends the river ghosts scurrying for cover.

Straight down out of the sky the disk

How to buy better work clothes



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swooped, a huge, spinning shape as flat as a buckwheat cake swimming in a golden haze of butterfat.

But the disk didn't remind Jimmy of a buckwheat cake. It made him think instead of a slowly turning wheel in the pilot house of a rotting old riverboat, a big, ghostly wheel manned by a steersman a century dead, his eye sockets filled with flickering swamp lights.

It made Jimmy want to run and hide. Almost it made him want to cling to his sister, content to let her wear the pants if only he could be spared the horror.

For there was something so chilling about the downsweeping disk that Jimmy's heart began leaping like a vinegar jug bobbing about in the wake of a capsizing fishboat.

Lower and lower the disk swept, trailing plumes of white smoke, lashing the water with a fearful blow. Straight down over the cypress wilderness that fringed the opposite bank, and then out across the river with a long-drawn whistling sound, louder than the air-sucking death gasps of a thousand buffalo cats.

Jimmy didn't see the disk strike the shining broad shoulders of the Father of Waters, for the bend around which the *Natchez Belle* had steamed so proudly hid the sky monster from view. But Jimmy did see the waterspout, spiraling skyward like the atom bomb explosion he'd goggled at in the pages of an old *Life* magazine, all smudged now with oily thumbprints.

Just a roaring for an instant—and a big white mushroom shooting straight up into the sky. Then, slowly, the mushroom decayed and fell back, and an awful stillness settled down over the river.

THE stillness was broken by a shrill cry from Pigtail Anne. "It was a flying saucer! Jimmy, we've seen one! We've seen one! We've—"

"Shut your mouth, Pigtail!"

Jimmy shaded his eyes and stared out across the river, his chest a throbbing ache.

He was still staring when a door creaked behind him.

Jimmy trembled. A tingling fear went through him, for he found it hard to realize that the disk had swept around the bend out of sight. To his overheated imagination it continued to fill all of the sky above him, overshadowing the shantyboat, making every sound a threat.

Sucking the still air deep into his lungs, Jimmy swung about.

Uncle Al was standing on the deck in a little pool of sunlight, his gaunt, hollow-cheeked face set in harsh lines. Uncle Al was shading his eyes too. But he was staring up the river, not down.

"Trouble, young fella," he grunted. "Sure as I'm a-standin' here. A barrelful o' trouble—headin' straight for us!"

Jimmy gulped and gestured wildly toward the bend. "It came down *over there*, Uncle Al!" he got out. "Pigtail saw it, too! A big, flying—"

"The Harmons are a-comin', young fella," Uncle Al drawled, silencing Jimmy with a wave of his hand. "Yesterday I rowed over a Harmon jug line without meanin' to. Now Jed Harmon's tellin' everybody I stole his fish!"

Very calmly Uncle Al cut himself a slice of the strongest tobacco on the river and packed it carefully in his pipe, wadding it down with his thumb.

He started to put the pipe between his teeth, then thought better of it.

"I can bone-feel the Harmon boat a-comin', young fella," he said, using the pipe to gesture with. "Smooth and quiet over the river like a moccasin snake."

Jimmy turned pale. He forgot about the disk and the mushrooming water spout. When he shut his eyes he saw only a red haze overhanging the river, and a shantyboat nosing out of the cypresses, its windows spitting death.

JIMMY knew that the Harmons had waited a long time for an excuse. The Harmons were law-respecting river rats with sharp teeth. Feuding wasn't lawful, but murder could be made lawful by whittling down a lie until it looked as sharp as the truth.

The Harmon brothers would do their whittling down with double-barreled shotguns. It was easy enough to make murder look like a lawful crime if you could point to a body covered by a blanket and say, "We caught him stealing our fish! He was a-goin' to kill us—so we got him first."

No one would think of lifting the blanket and asking Uncle Al about it. A man lying stiff and still under a blanket could no more make himself heard than a river cat frozen in the ice.

"Git inside, young 'uns. *Here they come*!"

Jimmy's heart skipped a beat. Down the river in the sunilght a shantyboat was drifting. Jimmy could see the Harmon brothers crouching on the deck, their faces livid with hate, sunlight glinting on their arm-cradled shotguns.

The Harmon brothers were not in the least alike. Jed Harmon was tall and gaunt, his right cheek puckered by a knife scar, his cruel, thin-lipped mouth snagged by his teeth. Joe Harmon was small and stout, a little round man with bushy eyebrows and the flabby face of a cottonmouth snake.

"Go inside, Pigtail," Jimmy said, calmly. "I'm a-going to stay and fight!"

UNCLE AL grabbed Jimmy's arm and swung him around. "You heard what I said, young fella. Now git!"

"I want to stay here and fight with you, Uncle Al," Jimmy said.

"Have you got a gun? Do you want to be blown apart, young fella?"

"I'm not scared, Uncle Al," Jimmy pleaded. "You might get wounded. I know how to shoot straight, Uncle Al. If you get hurt I'll go right on fighting!"

"No you won't, young fella! Take Pigtail inside. You hear me? You want me to take you across my knee and beat the livin' stuffings out of you?"

Silence.

Deep in his uncle's face Jimmy saw an anger he couldn't buck. Grabbing Pigtail Anne by the arm, he propelled her across the deck and into the dismal front room of the shantyboat.

The instant he released her she glared at him and stamped her foot. "If Uncle Al gets shot it'll be your fault," she said cruelly. Then Pigtail's anger really flared up.

"The Harmons wouldn't dare shoot us 'cause we're children!"

For an instant brief as a dropped heartbeat Jimmy stared at his sister with unconcealed admiration.

"You can be right smart when you've got nothing else on your mind, Pigtail," he said. "If they kill me they'll hang sure as shooting!"

Jimmy was out in the sunlight again before Pigtail could make a grab for him.

Out on the deck and running along the deck toward Uncle Al. He was still running when the first blast came.

IT DIDN'T sound like a shotgun blast. The deck shook and a big swirl of smoke floated straight toward Jimmy, half blinding him and blotting Uncle Al from view.

When the smoke cleared Jimmy could see the Harmon shantyboat. It was less than thirty feet away now, drifting straight past and rocking with the tide like a topheavy flatbarge.

On the deck Jed Harmon was crouching down, his gaunt face split in a triumphant smirk. Beside him Joe Harmon stood quivering like a mound of jelly, a stick of dynamite in his hand, his flabby face looking almost gentle in the slanting sunlight.

There was a little square box at Jed Harmon's feet. As Joe pitched Jed reached into the box for another dynamite stick. Jed was passing the sticks along to his brother, depending on wad dynamite to silence Uncle Al forever.

Wildly Jimmy told himself that the guns had been just a trick to mix Uncle Al up, and keep him from shooting until they had him where they wanted him.

Uncle Al was shooting now, his face as grim as death. His big heavy gun was leaping about like mad, almost hurling him to the deck.

Jimmy saw the second dynamite stick spinning through the air, but he never saw

it come down. All he could see was the smoke and the shantyboat rocking, and another terrible splintering crash as he went plunging into the river from the end of a rising plank, a sob strangling in his throat.

Jimmy struggled up from the river with the long leg-thrusts of a terrified bullfrog, his head a throbbing ache. As he swam shoreward he could see the cypresses on the opposite bank, dark against the sun, and something that looked like the roof of a house with water washing over it.

Then, with mud sucking at his heels, Jimmy was clinging to a slippery bank and staring out across the river, shading his eyes against the glare.

Jimmy thought, "I'm dreaming! I'll wake up and see Uncle Joe blowing on a vinegar jug. I'll see Pigtail, too. Uncle Al will be sitting on the deck, taking it easy!"

But Uncle Al wasn't sitting on the deck. There was no deck for Uncle Al to sit upon. Just the top of the shantyboat, sinking lower and lower, and Uncle Al swimming.

Uncle Al had his arm around Pigtail, and Jimmy could see Pigtail's white face bobbing up and down as Uncle Al breasted the tie with his strong right arm.

Closer to the bend was the Harmon shantyboat. The Harmons were using their shotguns now, blasting fiercely away at Uncle Al and Pigtail. Jimmy could see the smoke curling up from the leaping guns and the water jumping up and down in little spurts all about Uncle Al.

There was an awful hollow agony in Jimmy's chest as he stared, a fear that was partly a soundless screaming and partly a vision of Uncle Al sinking down through the dark water and turning it red.

It was strange, though. Something was happening to Jimmy, nibbling away at the outer edges of the fear like a big, hungry river cat. Making the fear seem less swollen and awful, shredding it away in little flakes.

There was a white core of anger in Jimmy which seemed suddenly to blaze up.

He shut his eyes tight.

In his mind's gaze Jimmy saw himself holding the Harmon brothers up by their long, mottled legs. The Harmon brothers were frogs. Not friendly, good natured frogs like Uncle Al, but snake frogs. Cottonmouth frogs.

All flannel red were their mouths, and they had long evil fangs which dripped poison in the sunlight. But Jimmy wasn't afraid of them no-ways. Not any more. He had too firm a grip on their legs.

"Don't let anything happen to Uncle Al and Pigtail!" Jimmy whispered, as though he were talking to himself. No—not exactly to himself. To someone like himself, only larger. Very close to Jimmy, but larger, more powerful.

"Catch them before they harm Uncle Al! Hurry! *Hurry*!"

There was a strange lifting sensation in Jimmy's chest now. As though he could shake the river if he tried hard enough, tilt it, send it swirling in great thunderous white surges clear down to Lake Pontchartrain.

BUT Jimmy didn't want to tilt the river. Not with Uncle Al on it and Pigtail, and all those people in New Orleans who would disappear right off the streets. They were frogs too, maybe, but good frogs. Not like the Harmon brothers.

Jimmy had a funny picture of himself much younger than he was. Jimmy saw himself as a great husky baby, standing in the middle of the river and blowing on it with all his might. The waves rose and rose, and Jimmy's cheeks swelled out and the river kept getting angrier.

No—he must fight that.

"Save Uncle Al!" he whispered fiercely. "Just save him—and Pigtail!"

It began to happen the instant Jimmy opened his eyes. Around the bend in the sunlight came a great spinning disk, wrapped in a fiery glow.

Straight toward the Harmon shantyboat the disk swept, water spurting up all about it, its bottom fifty feet wide. There was no collision. Only a brightness for one awful instant where the shantyboat was twisting and turning in the current, a brightness that outshone the rising sun.

Just like a camera flashbulb going off, but bigger, brighter. So big and bright that Jimmy could see the faces of the Harmon brothers fifty times as large as life, shriveling and disappearing in a magnifying burst of flame high above the cypress trees. Just as though a giant in the sky had trained a big burning glass on the Harmon brothers and whipped it back quick.

Whipped it straight up, so that the faces would grow huge before dissolving as a warning to all snakes. There was an evil anguish in the dissolving faces which made Jimmy's blood run cold. Then the disk was alone in the middle of the river, spinning around and around, the shantyboat swallowed up.

And Uncle Al was still swimming, fearfully close to it.

The net came swirling out of the disk over Uncle Al like a great, dew-drenched gossamer web. It enmeshed him as he swam, so gently that he hardly seemed to struggle or even to be aware of what was happening to him.

Pigtail didn't resist, either. She simply stopped thrashing in Uncle Al's arms, as though a great wonder had come upon her.

Slowly Uncle Al and Pigtail were drawn into the disk. Jimmy could see Uncle Al reclining in the web, with Pigtail in the crook of his arm, his long, angular body as quiet as a butterfly in its deep winter sleep inside a swaying glass cocoon.

Uncle Al and Pigtail, being drawn together into the disk as Jimmy stared, a dull pounding in his chest. After a moment the pounding subsided and a silence settled down over the river.

Jimmy sucked in his breath. The voices began quietly, as though they had been waiting for a long time to speak to Jimmy deep inside his head, and didn't want to frighten him in any way.

"Take it easy, Jimmy! Stay where you are. We're just going to have a friendly little talk with Uncle Al."

"A t-talk?" Jimmy heard himself stammering.

"We knew we'd find you where life flows

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simply and serenely, Jimmy. Your parents took care of that before they left you with Uncle Al.

"You see, Jimmy, we wanted you to study the Earth people on a great, wide flowing river, far from the cruel, twisted places. To grow up with them, Jimmy—and to understand them. Especially the Uncle Als. For Uncle Al is unspoiled, Jimmy. If there's any hope at all for Earth as we guide and watch it, that hope burns most brightly in the Uncle Als!"

The voice paused, then went on quickly. "You see, Jimmy, you're not human in the same way that your sister is human—or Uncle Al. But you're still young enough to feel human, and we want you to feel human, Jimmy."

"W—Who are you?" Jimmy gasped.

"We are the Shining Ones, Jimmy! For wide wastes of years we have cruised Earth's skies, almost unnoticed by the Earth people. When darkness wraps the Earth in a great, spinning shroud we hide our ships close to the cities, and glide through the silent streets in search of our young. You see, Jimmy, we must watch and protect the young of our race until sturdiness comes upon them, and they are ready for the Great Change."

FOR an instant there was a strange, humming sound deep inside Jimmy's head, like the drowsy murmur of bees in a dew-drenched clover patch. Then the voice droned on. "The Earth people are frightened by our ships now, for their cruel wars have put a great fear of death in their hearts. They watch the skies with sharper eyes, and their minds have groped closer to the truth.

"To the Earth people our ships are no longer the fireballs of mysterious legend, haunted will-o'-the-wisps, marsh flickerings and the even more illusive distortions of the sick in mind. It is a long bold step from fireballs to flying saucers, Jimmy. A day will come when the Earth people will be wise enough to put aside fear. Then we can show ourselves to them as we really are, and help them openly."

The voice seemed to take more complete possession of Jimmy's thoughts then, growing louder and more eager, echoing through his mind with the persuasiveness of muted chimes.

"Jimmy, close your eyes tight. We're going to take you across wide gulfs of space to the bright and shining land of your birth."

Jimmy obeyed.

It was a city, and yet it wasn't like New York or Chicago or any of the other cities Jimmy had seen illustrations of in the newspapers and picture magazines.

The buildings were white and domed and shining, and they seemed to tower straight up into the sky. There were streets, too, weaving in and out between the domes like rainbow-colored spider webs in a forest of mushrooms.

THERE were no people in the city, but down the aerial streets shining objects swirled with the swift easy gliding of flat stones skimming an edge of running water.

Then as Jimmy stared into the depths of the strange glow behind his eyelids the city dwindled and fell away, and he saw a huge circular disk looming in a wilderness of shadows. Straight toward the disk a shining object moved, bearing aloft on filaments of flame a much smaller object that struggled and mewed and reached out little white arms.

Closer and closer the shining object came, until Jimmy could see that it was carrying a human infant that stared straight at Jimmy out of wide, dark eyes. But before he could get a really good look at the shining object it pierced the shadows and passed into the disk.

There was a sudden, blinding burst of light, and the disk was gone.

Jimmy opened his eyes.

"You were once like that baby, Jimmy!" the voice said. "You were carried by your parents into a waiting ship, and then out across wide gulfs of space to Earth.

"You see, Jimmy, our race was once entirely human. But as we grew to maturity we left the warm little worlds where our

infancy was spent, and boldly sought the stars, shedding our humanness as sunlight sheds the dew, or a bright, soaring moth of the night its ugly pupa case.

"We grew great and wise, Jimmy, but not quite wise enough to shed our human heritage of love and joy and heartbreak. In our childhood we must return to the scenes of our past, to take root again in familiar soil, to grow in power and wisdom slowly and sturdily, like a seed dropped back into the loam which nourished the great flowering mother plant.

"Or like the eel of Earth's seas, Jimmy, that must be spawned in the depths of the great cold ocean, and swim slowly back to the bright highlands and the shining rivers of Earth. Young eels do not resemble their parents, Jimmy. They're white and thin and transparent and have to struggle hard to survive and grow up.

"Jimmy, you were planted here by your parents to grow wise and strong. Deep in your mind you knew that we had come to seek you out, for we are all born human, and are bound one to another by that knowledge, and that secret trust.

"You knew that we would watch over you and see that no harm would come to you. You called out to us, Jimmy, with all the strength of your mind and heart. Your Uncle Al was in danger and you sensed our nearness.

"It was partly your knowledge that saved him, Jimmy. But it took courage too, and a willingness to believe that you were more than human, and armed with the great proud strength and wisdom of the Shining Ones."

THE voice grew suddenly gentle, like a caressing wind.

"You're not old enough yet to go home, Jimmy! Or wise enough. We'll take you home when the time comes. Now we just want to have a talk with Uncle Al, to find out how you're getting along."

Jimmy looked down into the river and then up into the sky. Deep down under the dark, swirling water he could see life taking shape in a thousand forms. Caddis flies building bright, shining new nests, and dragonfly nymphs crawling up toward the sunlight, and pollywogs growing sturdy hindlimbs to conquer the land.

But there were cottonmouths down there too, with death behind their fangs, and no love for the life that was crawling upward. When Jimmy looked up into the sky he could see all the blazing stars of space, with cottonmouths on every planet of every sun.

Uncle Al was like a bright caddis fly building a fine new nest, thatched with kindness, denying himself bright little Mardi Gras pleasures so that Jimmy could go to school and grow wiser than Uncle Al.

"That's right, Jimmy. You're growing up—we can see that! Uncle Al says he told you to hide from the cottonmouths. But you were ready to give your life for your sister and Uncle Al."

"Shucks, it was nothing!" Jimmy heard himself protesting.

"Uncle Al doesn't think so. And neither do we!"

A LONG silence while the river mists seemed to weave a bright cocoon of radiance about Jimmy clinging to the bank, and the great circular disk that had swallowed up Uncle Al.

Then the voices began again. "No reason why Uncle Al shouldn't have a little fun out of life, Jimmy. Gold's easy to make and we'll make some right now. A big lump of gold in Uncle Al's hand won't hurt him in any way."

"Whenever he gets any spending money he gives it away!" Jimmy gulped.

"I know, Jimmy. But he'll listen to you. Tell him you want to go to New Orleans, too!"

Jimmy looked up quickly then. In his heart was something of the wonder he'd felt when he'd seen his first riverboat and waited for he knew not what. Something of the wonder that must have come to men seeking magic in the sky, the rainmakers of ancient tribes and of days long vanished.

Only to Jimmy the wonder came now with a white burst of remembrance and recognition.

It was as though he could sense something of himself in the two towering spheres that rose straight up out of the water behind the disk. Still and white and beautiful they were, like bubbles floating on a rainbow sea with all the stars of space behind them.

Staring at them, Jimmy saw himself as he would be, and knew himself for what he was. It was not a glory to be long endured.

"Now you must forget again, Jimmy! Forget as Uncle Al will forget—until we come for you. Be a little shantyboat boy! You are safe on the wide bosom of the Father of Waters. Your parents planted you in a rich and kindly loam, and in all the finite universes you will find no cosier nook, for life flows here with a diversity that is infinite and—*Pigtail*! She gets on your nerves at times, doesn't she, Jimmy?"

"She sure does," Jimmy admitted.

"Be patient with her, Jimmy. She's the only human sister you'll ever have on Earth."

"I—I'll try!" Jimmy muttered.

UNCLE Al and Pigtail came out of the disk in an amazingly simple way. They just seemed to float out, in the glimmering web. Then, suddenly, there wasn't any disk on the river at all—just a dull flickering where the sky had opened like a great, blazing furnace to swallow it up.

"I was just swimmin' along with Pigtail, not worryin' too much, 'cause there's no sense in worryin' when death is starin' you in the face," Uncle Al muttered, a few minutes later.

Uncle Al sat on the riverbank beside Jimmy, staring down at his palm, his vision misted a little by a furious blinking.

"It's gold, Uncle Al!" Pigtail shrilled. "A big lump of solid gold—"

"I just felt my hand get heavy and there it was, young fella, nestling there in my palm!"

Jimmy didn't seem to be able to say anything.

"High school books don't cost no more than grammar school books, young fella," Uncle Al said, his face a sudden shining. "Next winter you'll be a-goin' to high school, sure as I'm a-sittin' here!"

For a moment the sunlight seemed to blaze so brightly about Uncle Al that Jimmy couldn't even see the holes in his socks.

Then Uncle Al made a wry face. "Someday, young fella, when your books are all paid for, I'm gonna buy myself a brand new store suit, and hie myself off to the Mardi Gras. Ain't too old thataway to git a little fun out of life, young fella!"

Heading by Vincent Napoli

Old Mr. Wiley and the dog came over every night . . . but were they real?

Old Mr. Wiley

BY

GREYE LA SPINA

"HE JUST lies here tossing and moaning until he's so weak that he sinks into a kind of coma," said the boy's father huskily. "There doesn't seem anything particular the matter with him now but weakness. Only," he choked, "that he doesn't care much about getting well."

Miss Beaver kept her eyes on that thin little body outlined by the fine linen sheet. She caught her breath and bit her lower lip to check its trembling. So pitiful, that small

scion of a long line of highly placed aristocratic and wealthy forebears, that her cool, capable hand went out involuntarily to soothe the fevered childish brow. She wanted suddenly to gather the little body into her warm arms, against her kind breast. Her emotion, she realized, was far from professional; Frank Wiley IV had somehow laid a finger on her heartstrings.

"If you can rouse him from this lethargy and help him find some interest in living," Frank Wiley III said thickly, "you won't find me unappreciative, Miss Beaver."

The nurse contemplated that small, apathetic patient in silence. Doctor Parris had warned her that unless the boy's interest could somehow be stimulated, the little fellow would die from sheer lack of incentive to live. Her emotion moistened her eyes and constricted her throat muscles. She had to clear her throat before she could speak.

"I can only promise to do my very best for this dear little boy," she said hurriedly. "No human being can do more than his best."

"Doctor Parris tells me you have been uniformly successful with the cases he's put you on. I hope," the young father entreated, "that you'll follow your usual precedent."

"The doctor is too kind," murmured Miss Beaver with slightly lifted brows. "I fear he gives me more credit than I deserve."

"There I hope you're wrong. He calls you an intuitive psychic. It is upon your intuitions that I'm banking now. My affection hampers me from fathoming Frank's innermost thoughts. If I were really *sure* what he needed most, I'd get it for him if it were a spotted giraffe," declared his father passionately. "But I'm unable to go deeply enough into his real thoughts."

"If his own father cannot think of something he would care for enough to make him want to live, how can an outsider find out what he might be wanting?" argued the nurse, a touch of resentment in her voice. "Would not his own mother know what would make him want to take hold on life?"

There was an awkward pause.

"His mother," began Frank Wiley III and was interrupted by a light tap on the door panel, at which he went silent, turning away as if relieved to escape any explanation.

The door swung open, permitting the entrance of a young and very pretty woman, one who knew exactly what a charming picture she made in jade negligee over peach pajamas. About her exceedingly well-shaped head ash-blonde hair lay in close artificial waves. She was such a distinctively blonde type that Miss Beaver could not control her slightly startled downward glance at the dark child tossing on the bed. Her upward look of bewilderment was met by Frank Wiley's faint smile.

"He takes after the founder of our family," said he in a low, almost confidential voice. "His great-grandfather was said to have had Indian blood in his veins, as well as a touch of old Spain. The boy doesn't look like his mother or me. He's a real throw-back."

The pretty woman had come across the room, pettishly lifting her silk clad shoulders. Through the straps of embroidered sandals red-tipped toes wriggled. At the tumbled bed and its small restless occupant she threw what appeared to Miss Beaver a distasteful glance, ignoring the nurse entirely although she had not met her previously and must have known that the strange young woman was the new night nurse.

"Do come to bed, Frank," she urged crossly, placing a proprietory hand on her husband's coat sleeve. "It won't do you any good to moon around in here and it might disturb Francis."

Miss Beaver stood by her patient's bed, her clear gray eyes full upon young Mrs. Wiley. The nurse experienced a kind of disgust, together with one of those uncomfortable intuitions upon the reliability of which Doctor Parris was always depending. She knew, all at once, that Mrs. Wiley was that strange type of modern woman which makes a cult of personal beauty, taking wifehood lightly and submitting to maternity as infrequently as possible.

"I suppose you're right, Florry," the father conceded, with a last solicitous look at the exhausted child. "Miss Beaver . . .?"

The nurse nodded, her lips a tight red line.

"It would be better for the patient if the room were quiet and darkened," she said with decision.

WHEN the door had closed behind the pair, Miss Beaver busied herself making the child more comfortable for the night. She smoothed out the cool linen sheets, drawing them taut under the wasted little body. She bathed the hot face with water and alcohol. To all her ministrations the child submitted in a kind of lethargy, speaking no word, making no sign that he had noticed a different attendant. When she had quite finished, he breathed a long sigh of relaxation; his quivering, weak little body went suddenly limp, and Miss Beaver had a good scare as she bent over him, trying to bring back that weary and reluctant spirit to its exhausted mortal domicile.

It was by then nearly half past seven, The child lay supine; heavy-lidded eyes half opened upon this tormentress who had somehow succeeded in calling him back into the dimly lighted room from the shadows of Lethe's alluring banks. Miss Beaver, kneeling beside young Frank's bed, talked tenderly to him in a soft monotone. She made all manner of gratuitous promises, if only Frank would try like a good boy to get well. She told him firmly that he could, if he wanted to. She made her suggestions with gently persuasive voice, coloring all she said with the warmth of a heart peculiarly open to the unknown needs of the listless child. To those unknown needs she opened wide her spirit, crying within for enlightenment and help.

While she was thus occupied, she became aware of that sensation of being watched that is so startling when one considers oneself alone. Without rising, she turned her face quickly from the pillow of young Frank and looked across the bed. A member of the household about whom Doctor Parris had neglected to tell her was standing there, one finger on his lips which, though firm, wore a reassuring smile that immediately conveyed his warm friendliness. He was a well preserved elderly gentleman of aristocratic mien, clad in a bright blue garment of odd cut, his neck wound about with spotlessly white linen in lieu of a starched collar. His high nose, raised cheek-bones, flashing black eyes and olive skin contrasted in lively fashion with a heavy mane of white hair. His eyes as well as his lips conveyed a kindliness which Miss Beaver's answering smile reciprocated.

Tapping his lips again with admonitory forefinger, the old gentleman now produced, with a broad smile, something from beneath his right arm. Leaning down, he set this carefully beside the listless child. As he put it down, it gave a whining little cry.

Young Frank's eyes widened incredulously. Miss Beaver kept him under intent regard as he turned his dark head on the pillow to see what it was that was sitting on the bed.

"Oh!" he cried in a kind of rapture and put one thin white hand outside the covers

to touch the small creature that now stood wagging a brief tail in friendly fashion. "Is it mine?"

The child looked up at the old gentleman who once more, with serious mien and a significant movement of his head toward the door, gestured for silence. The boy's eyes blinked once or twice; then with a weak but ecstatic smile he laid a pale hand upon the furry coat of the little dog that began to bounce about, licking the hand that caressed it.

Miss Beaver told herself that the old gentleman had found a way to lay hold on young Frank's reluctant spirit. She watched color creep into the boy's face as he cuddled the little dog blissfully, and she drew a deep breath of heart-felt relief when the heavy eyelids drooped and the boy slipped off into a natural sleep, nothing like the heavy coma from which she had struggled so hard to bring him back earlier that night.

She looked up thankfully to meet the understanding gaze of the old gentleman who with that gesture of admonishment bent over and picked up the dog, tucked it under his blue-sleeved arm and went across the room to the door. He did not speak but Miss Beaver received the vivid impression that his visit would be repeated the following night; it was as if her sensitive intuitions could receive and register a wordless message from that other sympathetic soul.

The following morning found the lad refreshed and improved. His first waking thought was for the dog and in reply to his cautiously whispered inquiry Miss Beaver whispered back that his grandfather (the strong family resemblance made her sure it had been the boy's wise grandfather who had found a means of rousing the child from an all-but-fatal lethargy) had taken it with him but would bring it again that night. Miss Beaver wondered at herself for promising this but felt somehow sure that old Mr. Wiley would bring the pup without fail. She believed that she had read indomitable determination in those piercing black eyes; she knew inwardly that he would not rest until he had found that thing which would give young Frank renewed interest in living.

Although the child appeared, if anything, a trifle less apathetic the following day and Miss Beaver felt that each succeeding visit of old Mr. Wiley with the fox-terrier would give the lad another push toward convalescence, yet the nurse did not feel inclined to mention openly that secret visit in the dead of night. The old gentleman's finger tapping his gravely smiling lips was one thing that restrained her; the other was the irritation betrayed, ingenuously enough, by the boy's mother during her early morning visit to the sickroom.

YOUNG Mrs. Wiley looked especially pretty in a pleated jade sports skirt, a white pullover sweater, a jade beret on her fair hair. Under one arm she carried a small white Pomeranian about whose neck flared a matching wide jade satin bow.

"Well, how is Francis this morning?" she inquired briskly with the determined manner of one dutifully performing an unpleasant task. "He looks better, doesn't he?"

Miss Beaver, to whom this inquiry was addressed, nodded shortly.

The boy did not look at his pretty young mother after his first indifferent glance as she entered the room. He lay in silence with closed eyes and compressed lips, a most unchildlike expression on his thin boyish face.

"Look, Francis! See how sweet Kiki looks with this big green bow!"

Mrs. Wiley dropped the Pomeranian on the bed. The dog snarled and snapped viciously. Frank thrust out one hand and gave the animal a pettish push. Bestowing a hard, cold glare on her son, Mrs. Wiley snatched up the growling dog in high indignation.

"There! I ask you, nurse, if that child isn't just unnatural. I thought boys liked dogs. Francis is queer. I believe he actually hates Kiki." She lifted the dog against her face, permitting it to loll its pink tongue against her carefully rouged cheek. "Pwecious . . . Was it muvver's own pwecious ikkle Kiki? Francis," she addressed her son sharply, "you'll have to get over your nasty ugliness to poor little Kiki. It's a shame, the way you hate dogs!"

"But I don't hate dogs!" cried the boy vehemently, his voice breaking with indignant resentment. "It's just Kiki. I'd love to have a little dog of my very own, Mother. If you'd only let me have a little dog of my very own!" The faint voice died away in a sick wail. The boy's eyelids closed tightly against gushing tears.

Mrs. Wiley gave a short exclamation of impatience.

"Francis has the idea that a dirty mongrel would be nicer than a beautiful pedigreed dog like Kiki," she cried disgustedly.

"But why not try letting him have a dog of his own?" asked Miss Beaver ill-advisedly, her interest getting the better of her. "Perhaps it would give him interest enough . . ."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Wiley sharply. "I won't have street mutts wandering around the house to irritate poor little Kiki. Nasty smelly common mongrels with fleas. Indeed not. I'm surprised at you, nurse, for making the suggestion."

With that, young Mrs. Wiley removed her vivid presence from the room, leaving Miss Beaver shrugging her shoulders and raising her eyebrows. And the little boy crying softly, the sheet pulled over his dark head.

"What's all this, Frankie?" asked the father's voice.

"*She* won't let me have a dog of my own," sobbed the boy, coming out from under the concealing sheet, lips a-quiver, eyes humid.

Miss Beaver's lips compressed. He called his mother "She" as if she were an outsider . . .

Frank Wiley III stood for a moment looking at his son, then let himself gently down on the edge of the bed, laying one big palm on the little chap's hot forehead. He did not speak, just sat and stroked the fevered brow with tenderness. On his face a dark look brooded. His eyes were absent, unhappy.

"Daddy, why couldn't I have just a *little* puppy of my own?"

The father replied with obvious effort.

"You know, Frankie, we have one small dog already," said he with forced lightness.

"Oh! Kiki!"

"Couldn't you manage to make friends with Kiki?"

"*She* doesn't really want Kiki to like me, Daddy." (Wise beyond his years, marvelled Miss Beaver.) "Kiki doesn't really like little boys."

"Oh, my God, Frankie, don't go to crying again! Don't you see that Daddy can't quarrel with Mother over a dog? Try to get well, old man, and we'll see then what we can do. How about a pony, son?"

The little boy disappeared under the sheet, refusing to reply. Miss Beaver could not bear his convulsive, hardly-controlled sobs, and turned an accusing face upon Frank Wiley III.

"Is it possible," she asked icily, "that Frank's mother would actually refuse him so small a thing as a puppy, if it meant the merest chance of his getting better?"

The face turned to hers was gloomy, the voice impatient.

"Oh, good God! Was ever a man in such a damnable situation? My dear Miss Beaver, ask the doctor to tell you how much influence I have in this household, before you blame me for not taking a firm stand with a woman as nervous and temperamental as Mrs. Wiley. I'd give my life willingly to bring my boy back to health but unhappily I'm not like the founders of our family. Some day I'll show you our family album. You'll find it easy to trace the strong resemblance Frankie has to his forebears. It's the damnably high spirit he gets from them that is so stubbornly killing him now."

HE ROSE, wheeled about and went to the door. Paused. Still with that brooding dark look on his face he turned to her again.

"If my death would make it any easier for Frank, I wouldn't hesitate a moment. I'm a failure. It wouldn't matter. But I feel that by living and watching over him I'm standing between my boy's development as an individual, and the subtlest, softest peril that could possibly threaten him. I would rather he died, if he cannot bring about what he wills for his own development. As

for me, I . . . I am a dead man walking futilely among the living."

With that, he swung out of the room.

Miss Beaver knelt by the boy's bed, murmuring persuasively to him as she strove to make him check his hysterical sobs.

"Frankie, you really must stop crying. You're too big a chap to cry and it only makes you worse. If you're a good boy today and eat your food, I'll let your grandfather bring the little dog tonight," she promised rashly.

The sheet turned down and Frank's reddened face peered at her plaintively.

"That was my *great*-grandfather," he assured her gravely.

"Well, great or great-great, it's all the same," she conceded good-humoredly.

"Do you really think he'll bring Spot tonight?"

"Of course he will. But you must eat your meals, take a long nap, and stop crying."

"Oh, I promise!" the boy cried eagerly.

The day, Miss Beaver was told later, was uneventful. She had remained with the day nurse until Doctor Parris had made his visit. The doctor had been much pleased to find his small patient in good spirits and congratulated himself upon having put Miss Beaver on the case.

"If our young friend continues to improve like this, Miss Beaver," he joked, "we'll have him playing football within a month." He lowered his voice for her ear only. "Has anything particular come under your notice that might account for this agreeable change?"

Miss Beaver's forehead wrinkled slightly. She regarded the doctor from narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

"Tell me, Doctor Parris, if it isn't asking too much, why Mr. Wiley is a Man-Afraid-of-his-Wife?"

The doctor could not repress an involuntary chuckle.

"Come now, nurse, don't you think you're asking rather a good deal?"

"No, I don't," retorted Miss Beaver shortly. "Nor do you think so, either. What I'm trying to get at is, why Mr. Wiley lets Mrs. Wiley prevent him from giving Frank a puppy that he wants?"

The doctor regarded her thoughtfully.

"So it's a pup the boy wants. Ha, hum!" he uttered.

"I'm asking you," she repeated impatiently.

"Oh! Eh! Well! Mrs. Wiley, you have undoubtedly discerned, is one of those self-centered egotists who simply cannot permit people to live any way but her way. She won't have another dog in the house because it might interfere with the comfort of that silly damn—excuse me—Pom of hers. If Frank were a bit older and could feign a penchant for the Pom and his mother got the idea that the animal's affection might be alienated from her, she would at once get the child another dog, just to keep him away from Kiki."

"All of which sounds subtle but isn't very helpful," decided Miss Beaver with unflattering directness. "I've told Mr. Wiley that I thought a dog might interest his son and Mr. Wiley replies that his wife won't let him get one. There is something more behind this and it's obvious you don't want to tell me."

"Oh, hang it, nurse! You always manage to get your own way with me, don't you? I'll probably have to marry you one of these days, so I can keep the upper hand," he grinned. "Well, then, Wiley is a weak sister and oughtn't to be. He's completely under his chorus-girl wife's thumb. He lost a good bit in Wall Street and what's left is in her name, so he's got to watch his step until he's recouped his losses.

"If he were like his father or his grandfather . . . but he isn't," snapped the doctor vexedly. "Now, this boy here, he's a throwback, young Frank is. He's the spittin' image of the founder of the family and I'm willing to wager he's got the grit and determination that once endowed old Frank Wiley I."

"I've observed," murmured Miss Beaver, "that you and his father call the boy Frank, while his mother refers to him as Francis."

"That's her hifalutin way of putting on the dog," nurse," Doctor Parris grinned wickedly. "His name on the birth certificate is Frank but she'd make a girlish Francis

of him if she had her own way. For some reason she isn't getting it. Her husband sticks to the old family name of Frank and the boy won't answer to Francis.

"She has a healthy respect for the first old Frank Wiley. If you were to see the family album, nurse, you'd be quick to catch the look in the old boy's eyes. Nobody ever put anything over on that lad, believe me."

"I've no doubt of that," thought Miss Beaver to herself, the indomitable countenance of her midnight visitor clear before her mind's eye. It was astonishing, that strong family resemblance. Aloud she snapped: "Family album, indeed! What I'm after is to get permission for this child to have a pet. I'm positive it would make all the difference in the world to him."

"You won't get permission, nurse. Mrs. Frank won't have any other pets around to bother precious Kiki," he said grimly.

"Not if it's a matter of life or death?" she persisted.

"She would laugh at your putting it just that way," growled the doctor, an absent expression stealing over his kindly face.

"Well, we'll see what we'll see," observed Miss Beaver cryptically, her mouth an ominous tight red line.

THE doctor suddenly spoke close to her ear, an odd note in his voice. "I'm going to prescribe something very unusual, nurse. Tomorrow night a covered basket will be delivered here for you. Take it into the boy's room and open it if he wakens during the night. Understand?"

"I can't say I do, Dr. Parris."

"You will," he promised. "I'll take that basket and its contents when I come around for my morning call. Unless," he told her grimly, "I can see my way to make the prescription stick."

It was with the utmost anxiety that Miss Beaver awaited the coming that night of old Mr. Wiley. The day nurse had told her that Frank had eaten a good lunch and what for him was a hearty supper. He had agreed to sleep if he were awakened the moment Spot arrived, and Miss Beaver had accepted his whispered offer. To her relief, he fell asleep immediately, natural color on his thin cheeks.

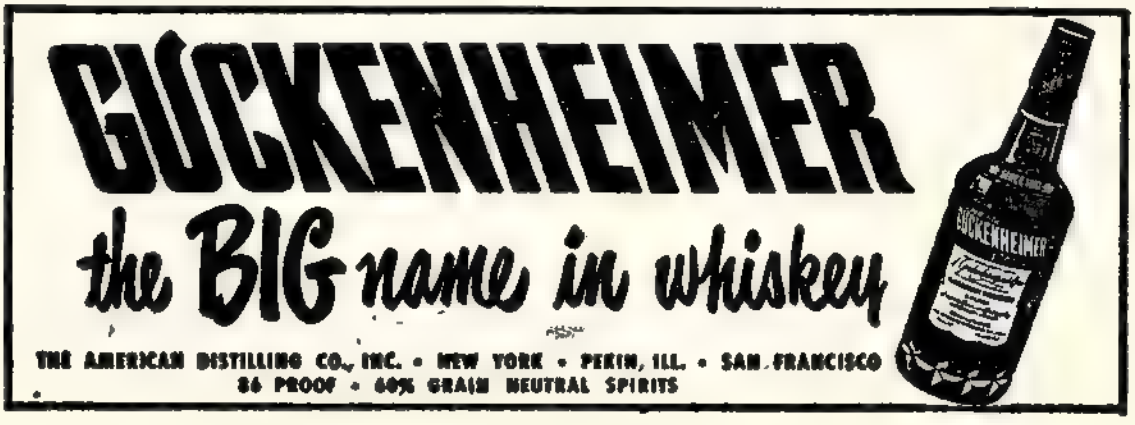
Mr. Wiley's light tap came on the door panel. She met his grave smile with a soft exclamation of welcome. The small dog was tucked under one arm and he paused to warn her with that admonitory touch of one finger to his lips that the secret of his visits must be preserved. She nodded comprehension, leaned over the sleeping boy and whispered softly in his ear.

He stirred, opened drowsy eyes. Then he pulled himself up on his pillow, reaching thin hands out to the spotted dog which nipped playfully at him.

"Isn't he wonderful? When may I have him all the time?"

"When you're well and don't need a night nurse," promised Miss Beaver rashly and was rewarded by a broad smile from the courtly old gentleman who tipped back his white-maned head and laughed silently but whole-heartedly.

"I'll get well at once, nurse. Don't you



think I might be well enough tomorrow? Or the day after? Not," he added politely, making Miss Beaver's heart ache with his childish apology, "not that I want you to leave, you know."

"That will be for the doctor to decide, Frank. But the more you eat and sleep and grow happy in your heart, the faster you'll get well," advised Miss Beaver earnestly.

For a long happy hour young Frank fraternized with the fox-terrier while the old gentleman sat silently observing him, a grimly humorous smile hovering about his firm lips. Then the boy's eyes began to cloud sleepily and much to Miss Beaver's surprise and pleasure Frank relinquished his canine playmate and fell asleep, a blissful smile curving his childish mouth as he breathed with soft regularity.

Then old Mr. Wiley picked up the puppy, tucked it under one blue-clad arm and again admonishing Miss Beaver with a finger athwart his lips, tiptoed from the room, closing the door behind very gently.

The nurse thought with a sigh of relief that the old gentleman had looked both pleased and gratified. She herself could hardly wait for morning, and for the day to pass, and was both pleased and encouraged herself when she went on duty the next night. Frank had asked to sit up for supper and when Miss Beaver entered the room he manfully refused the day nurse's assistance back to bed. The day nurse's uplifted brows betrayed her astonishment at the sudden turn for the better the young patient had taken.

"I'm almost well," piped up Frank Wiley IV, the moment the door closed behind the day nurse. "Tomorrow, the doctor says, I can sit out in the garden in the sun. Couldn't I have Spot then?"

"You just leave that to me," said Miss Beaver determinedly. "I may have much to say about your keeping Spot, Frank."

In her heart she was in reality panic-stricken for she knew that pretty Mrs. Wiley would indifferently laugh off the idea that ownership of a dog could mean returned health to her little son. Upon Frank Wiley III Miss Beaver felt no reliance could be placed; he was an uxorious weakling. Her unfounded hope rested on old Mr. Wiley alone; old Mr. Wiley whose firm mouth and implacable dark eyes made her feel that he, and he alone, held the key to the situation. That he had realized young Frank's need and had filled it, albeit in secret, gave her to believe that he would also furnish such good reason for yielding to young Frank's boyish yearning as would make Mrs. Frank retire in disorder from any contest of clashing wills.

But when the old gentleman stepped into the room that night he did not carry the little dog under his arm; what he had was something bulkier. He stopped beside the basket which had been sent to Miss Beaver and which she had not yet opened. He leaned down and released the lid. A little fox-terrier jumped out and stood, one small paw upheld, its head cocked to one side.

Miss Beaver drew in a quick gasping breath of admiring amazement at what she realized was the doctor's unusual prescription. If only old Mr. Wiley would stand by, to uphold it, she felt that the boy would recover. She drew his attention with a gesture.

"See how nicely our patient's coming along, Mr. Wiley," she whispered. "Oh, please, won't you make them let him keep the little dog Doctor Parris sent him? You can. I know you can."

OLD Mr. Wiley leaned over the bed, apparently taking pleased note of the faint color on the boy's cheeks. He smiled with obvious satisfaction. He lifted his head, met Miss Beaver's pleading eyes, and nodded emphatically. Then he slackened his hold on whatever he had tucked under one arm and deposited it at the foot of the bed, meeting Miss Beaver's questioning eyes with a significant narrowing of his own. She looked at the thing, then up at him, puzzled. What he had brought in was one of those huge, plush-covered atrocities with tall ivory letters on the front that proclaimed it to be a Family Album. She surmised that this must be the album which the doctor had said she should look over to note how closely the small boy in the bed resembled his ancestors.

With a light gesture old Mr. Wiley relegated the album to the background, his glance seeking the fox-terrier that still hesitated in the middle of the room. Miss Beaver understood. She gently wakened the small patient, who sat up rubbing sleepy eyes expectantly. The dog, sensing a playmate, bounded upon the bed and began lapping at Frank's eager fingers with small whimperings.

"He loves me. Don't you, Spot? Look, nurse. He has black spots over his eyes, bigger than I remembered them. And he seems littler tonight, doesn't he? But he knows me. Gee, I wish I could keep him all the time."

Old Mr. Wiley sat silently in a comfortable chair at the shadowy back of the room as he had done on his previous visits but his severe old features softened as he watched the happy child and the antics of the little dog. When at last Frank's eyes grew humid and heavy with sleep, and he began to slip down on his pillow, he clung to his canine playmate, refusing to relinquish the puppy which had cuddled cosily against him.

Old Mr. Wiley's heavy brows lifted into a straight line over his high nose. A grimly ironical smile drew up the corners of his mouth. He made a gesture of resignation. His humorously twinkling eyes met the consternation in Miss Beaver's but he appeared pleased and unmoved at the prospect of the dog's remaining with the boy. He rose from his comfortable chair, drew a deep breath, again touched the admonitory finger to his lips and withdrew, still smiling. The door closed quietly behind his stately blue-clad figure.

Miss Beaver told herself agitatedly that he had no business to throw the onus of the whole situation onto her shoulders; but even while she resented this high-handed behavior she was inwardly aware with one of her strong intuitions that old Mr. Wiley knew indubitably what he was about, and that at the psychological moment he would justify her in permitting the dog to remain with young Frank.

She was in no hurry the following morning to turn over her patient to the day nurse and lingered on in the hope that Doctor Parris would appear early enough to get the dog away, as he had half hinted. That he would do his best to make the prescription stick she saw immediately after he took a single look at young Frank who sat up nimbly, his color normal for the first time in weeks. The suppressed excitement in the atmosphere Doctor Parris could hardly be expected to understand until the boy drew back the covers to show the inquisitive black nose and beady eyes hidden beneath.

"Gee, Doctor Parris, isn't he just the cutest dog you ever saw?" chuckled young Frank. "Oh, gosh, here *she* comes!"

The cover was whipped over the dog, whose whimpers subsided with uncommonly good sense. Perhaps young Mrs. Wiley might not have felt the puppy's presence but Kiki's sharp nose was not so easily put upon. Kiki, with a shrill bark, scrambled from her arms and leaped upon the bed where he began scratching furiously at the cover which Frank was holding desperately but vainly against this unexpected onslaught.

"What on earth . . ." began his mother, her eyes going from Kiki to Miss Beaver's harried expression. "Oh! A nasty little dog right in Francis's bed! Francis, push it out! It's probably full of fleas. How did that nasty little mongrel get in here?"

"This pup isn't a mongrel, Mrs. Wiley," snapped the doctor. "Anyone can see with half an eye it's a pedigreed animal."

She disregarded him. "Frank! Come here! Nurse, you should have known better than to allow that horrid little mutt . . . "

Frank Wiley III almost ran into the room, obviously distressed over something quite different from his wife's trouble.

"Somebody has meddled with one of our family portraits," he cried with obvious agitation. "It's been damaged . . ."

"Oh, bother the family portraits!" shrilled his wife, highly exasperated. "Look at the nasty common dog this nurse has let Francis have right in his bed! I never heard of such nerve! Call Mason! Have him put this dog out immediately!"

"I'll take the dog, if it's to be put out,"

growled Doctor Parris. "I know a good dog when I see one," he muttered resentfully.

"Let *me* see that dog!" exclaimed Frank Wiley III in a strangely grave voice. He pushed the frantically excited Kiki from the bed to the floor. He drew back the cover from the little dog huddled apprehensively against young Frank's thin body. "Oh, good Lord! It's incredible! It just isn't possible!"

"Isn't it?" snapped his wife, looking with distastefully wrinkled nose at her husband's chalky face, wide staring eyes. "Well, here it is and out it goes. Ring for Mason, Frank, at once. I want this dirty little mongrel out!"

WITHOUT paying the slightest attention, her husband turned to Miss Beaver. As he did so, his staring eyes fell upon the ornate plush album on the foot of the bed.

"How did that get here?" he demanded.

"Old Mr. Wiley brought it last night," admitted Miss Beaver, who was feeling a trifle indignant at the old gentleman's defection.

"Old Mr. Wiley?" echoed Doctor Parris; stupidly, for him, Miss Beaver thought. "*Old Mr. Wiley?*"

Frank Wiley III, his voice shaky, almost shouted at her.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that old Mr. Wiley was here and brought that album?"

"I may as well tell you now as ever," snapped Miss Beaver and deliberately turned her back upon Mrs. Frank, addressing herself pointedly to Doctor Parris and the boy's father. "The old gentleman has been in here every night to see Frank since I've been on duty and he brought his little dog, and in my opinion his little dog should get the credit of any improvement in the patient's condition."

Frank Wiley III picked up the bulky volume and began turning the thick cardboard pages. His hands trembled; his face was queerly pasty.

"Turn the pages yourself, nurse, will you? See if you can find old Mr. Wiley's picture."

Miss Beaver flipped the cardboard pages one after another until a familiar face looked quizzically at her from a faded old daguerrotype. She put on finger triumphantly on it.

"Here he is. This is old Mr. Wiley."

Mrs. Frank tiptoed nearer, took a single look, then with a shrill scream fainted into Doctor Parris's convenient arms.

He muttered under his breath: "Superstitious damsel, this." Of Miss Beaver he asked drily as he deposited his fair burden distastefully in the big chair where the old gentleman had been sitting on his nightly visits: "My dear Miss Beaver, are you *very* certain old Mr. Wiley has been dropping in of nights?"

"Of course I am," declared Miss Beaver indignantly. "Is it so astonishing that I recognize a face I've been seeing now for three consecutive nights?"

"This *is* unbelievable," Frank Wiley III gasped.

Said the doctor gravely: "I ask you to be so very certain, nurse, because the original of that picture has been dead for over fifteen years."

As those astonishing words fell on Miss Beaver's ears, she turned from the doctor in sheer resentment.

"I don't care for practical jokes," said she with dignity to the boy's apparently stupefied father, "and I must say I resent being made sport of. I tell you plainly that old Mr. Wiley, the man in this picture," and she tapped her finger impressively on the album page, "has spent a couple of hours with Frankie and me every night since I've been on duty here, and that's *that*!"

"Then that's settled," exclaimed the boy's father in a loud and determined voice. "The dog stays."

As if miraculously restored, Mrs. Frank sprang to her feet.

"Is that *so*? Well, my dear husband, I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken. The dog goes!" She gave her husband glare for glare, the rouge standing in two round spots on her white face.

His look was one of active dislike. "We'll see about that, Florry. All of you, come out into the hall. I want you to see

something. Then let anyone say Frank can't keep that dog!"

He beckoned imperatively and they followed down the great staircase into the great hall below, where he stopped under a gilt-framed oil portrait, life size. His finger pointed significantly.

MISS BEAVER deciphered the small label at the front of the massive frame. The painting was a portrait of Frank Wiley I, the founder of the Wiley family. Her eyes rose higher to really look at the picture for the first time since she had been in the house. It was the living likeness of old Mr. Wiley and it almost seemed to her that, as she stared, one of his eyelids quivered slightly as if in recognition of her belated admiration for his diplomatic procedure. Beside him on the painted table one of his fine hands lay negligently or rather, seemed to be lying higher than the table proper, resting on . . . was it just bare canvas?

"Look for yourself, Florry! Where is the fox-terrier that was painted sitting on the table under Grandfather's hand?"

Young Mrs. Wiley stared pallidly at the likeness of the founder of the Wiley clan. "White paint," she conjectured. Then, peering closer at the canvas: "Somebody's scraped off the paint where the dog used to be."

Stiff and grim, his own man now, her husband faced her.

"Does my boy keep that dog?"

Behind them sounded a low exclamation. At the head of the staircase stood young Frank, the puppy tucked securely under one arm.

"Nobody's going to take away my little dog that Great-grandfather Wiley brought me," cried the lad stoutly, black eyes flashing, thin face determined and unyielding.

"Don't let that dog come near me!" screamed Mrs. Frank and went into a genuine attack of hysteria. "He isn't *real!*"

Doctor Parris exchanged a look with Miss Beaver, whose face was pale but contented.

"I always knew you were psychic," he whispered, brows drawn into a puzzled scowl. "That's how the old gentleman, God rest his wilful soul, could get through."

"I wondered that he never spoke a single word! Now that it's over, I think I'm going to faint," decided Miss Beaver shakily.

"Nonsense," snapped the doctor with scant courtesy. "But *she* is well scared, thank God. I hardly think she will interfere much in future with young Frank. And by the looks of him, the boy's father has had his backbone stiffened considerably."

"That painted dog?" whispered Miss Beaver's tremulous lips.

"Eh? Yes. Ah, yes, the dog," murmured the doctor, too casually.

"You—you—dared!" uttered Miss Beaver incoherently under her breath.

"Not altogether," he protested against her ear.

He pointed upward. Miss Beaver's eyes followed that gesture and met the admonitory, inscrutable, but very gratified pictured eyes of old Mr. Wiley.

"... to live you must feed on the living"

Heading by Vincent Napoli

Each Man Kills

BY VICTORIA GLAD

NOW that it's all over, it seems like a bad dream. But when I look at Maria's picture on my desk, I realize it couldn't have been a dream. Actually, it was only six months ago that I sat at this same desk, looking at her picture, wondering what could have happened to her. It had been six weeks since there had been

any word from her, and she had promised to write as soon as she arrived in Europe. Considering that my future rested in her small hands, I had every right to be apprehensive.

We had grown up together, had lost our folks within a few years of each other and had been fond of each other the way kids are apt to be. Then the change came: It seemed I loved her, and she was still just "fond" of me. During our early college days I sort of let things ride, but once we went on to graduate school, I began to crowd her.

The next thing I knew, she had signed up with a student tour destined for Central Europe, and told me she would give me my answer when she returned. I had to be content with that, but couldn't help worrying. Maria was a strange girl—withdrawn, dreamy and soft-hearted. Knowing the section she was going to, I was inclined to be uneasy, since it is the realm of gypsies, fortune tellers and the like. It is also the birthplace of many strange legends, and Maria claimed to be strongly psychic. As a matter of fact, she had foretold one or two things which were probably coincidental, like the death of our parents, and which even made an impression on me—and you'd hardly call me a "believer."

This so-called talent of hers led her into trouble on more than one occasion. I remember in her senior year at college she fell under the spell of a short, fat, greasy spook-reader with a strictly phony accent and all but gave her eye teeth away, until I realized something was amiss, got to the bottom of it, and dispatched friend spook-reader *pronto*. If she should meet some unscrupulous person now, with no one around to get her out of the scrape—but I didn't want to think of that. I was sure this time everything would be all right.

When she didn't write at first, I let it go that she was busy. Finally, six weeks' silent treatment aroused my curiosity. It also aroused my nasty temper, and the next thing I knew I was on a plane bound for the Continent. Within two hours after landing, I found her at a little inn in Transylvania, a quaint little place that looked as if it were made of gingerbread, and was surrounded by the huge, craggy Transylvania Mountain range. I also found Tod Hunter.

"What's wrong, Maria? Why didn't you write?" I asked.

Her usually gay, shining brown eyes flashed angrily. "Why couldn't you leave me alone? I told you not to come after me. I came here so I could think this out. For God's sake, Bill, can't you see I wanted to think? To be by myself?"

"But you promised to write," I persisted, wondering at this change in her, this impatience. Wondered, too, at her wraithlike slimness. She'd always been curved in the right places.

"Maria has been studying much too diligently," Tod said slowly. "She's always tired lately. She hasn't been too well, either. Her throat bothers her."

I WANTED to punch his head in. For some reason I didn't like him. Not because I sensed his rivalry; I was above that. God knows I wanted her to be happy, above everything. It was just something about him that irritated me. An attitude. Not supercilious; I could have coped with that. Rather, it was a calm imperturbability that seemed to speak his faith in his eventual success, regardless of any effort on my part.

I don't know how to fight that sort of strategy. I look like I am: blunt and obvious. Suddenly I didn't care if he was there.

"Maria. Ria, darling. This guy's no good for you, can't you see that? What do you know about him?"

She looked at me, her eyes surprised and a little hurt. Then she looked at him, seemed to be looking *through* him and into herself, if you know what I mean. A slow flush spread from the base of her throat, that thin, almost transparent throat.

"All I have to know," she said softly. "I love him."

She looked out the window. "I'm going up into *Konigstein Mountain,* to a small sanitorium for my health shortly; the doctor has told me I must go away, and Tod has suggested this place. There Tod and I shall be married."

I knew then how it felt to be on the re-

ceiving end of a monkey-punch. That she had come to this decision because of my objections, I had not the slightest doubt. She was going to marry someone about whom she knew absolutely nothing. She was much more ill than she knew. Hunter was undoubtedly after her money; she was considerably well-off. Obviously she was once more being influenced in the wrong direction.

"I won't let you!" I warned. "Give it some more time, if for nothing else, then for old times' sake."

"How about me, Morris?" Tod interrupted. "You haven't asked me my feelings on the subject. I happen to love Maria dearly. Have I no say just because you're a childhood friend of hers?"

"Childhood friend! I was her whole family for years before she ever heard of you! I'll see you in hell before I let her marry you!" I shouted. Looking back, I'm sure that had he said anything else, I would have killed him, if Ria hadn't come between us.

"That's enough, Bill Morris! I've heard all I want to from you. I'm twenty-three, and if I choose to marry Tod, I'll do so and there's nothing you can do about it. Now, please go."

"Okay, Ria," I said, "if that's the way you want it. But I'm not through. If you won't protect yourself, I'll do it for you. I'd like to know more about the mysterious Mr. Tod Hunter, American, and I do wish, for your own sake, you'd do the same. I wouldn't care if you married King Tut, so long as you knew all about him. People just don't marry strangers; not if they're smart. For God's sake, ask him about himself!"

"All right, Bill," she replied, smiling patiently. "I'll ask him. Now, do stop being childish."

"Okay, darling," I said sheepishly. "But do me one more favor. Don't marry him until I get back. Only a little while; give me a week. Just wait a little longer."

As I closed the door, I could still feel his smile, mocking—yet a little sad.

But Maria didn't wait. I was gone a week. I had walked my legs off trying to track down the elusive Mister Hunter and discovered exactly—nothing. All his landlady could tell me was that he was an American who had come to this climate for his health, and that he slept late mornings. I was licked and I knew it. If I had been a pup, I would have fitted my tail neatly between my legs and made for home. But I wasn't a pup, so I headed straight for Ria's flat to face the music.

THEY were waiting for me, she and Tod. When I saw her, I wished I were dead.

She lay in Tod's arms, her body a mere whisper of a body. White and cold she was, like frozen milk on a cold winter's day. They were both dead.

You know how it is when at a wake someone views the deceased and says kindly, "She's beautiful," and "she" isn't beautiful at all; just a made-up, lifeless handful of clay. Dead as dead, and frightening. Well, it wasn't that way this time. Their fair skins were faintly pink-tinted and their blonde heads, hers ashen and his a reddish cast, gleamed brightly. And they sat so close in the sofa before the fire, his head resting in the hollow of her throat. They looked—peaceful; no line marred their faces. I almost fancied I saw them breathe. And on her third finger, left hand, was the ring—a thin, platinum band. He had won, and in winning somehow he had lost. How they had died and why they found each other and death at the same time, I would probably never know. I only knew one thing: I had to get away from there—quickly. I almost ran the distance to my flat. Stumbled into the place and poured a triple Scotch which I could scarcely hold. The Scotch seared my throat and tasted bitter; someone must have poured salt in it. Then I realized that it was tears—my tears. I, Bill Morris, who hadn't cried since my fifth birthday—I was sobbing like a baby.

I didn't call the police. That would mean I would have to go back and watch them cover that lovely body, carry it away and submit it to untold indignities in order to ascertain the cause of death. The cleaning girl would find them in the morning and would notify the police.

But it wasn't so simple as that. In the

morning I found I couldn't shake off the guilt which possessed me. Even two bottles of Scotch hadn't helped me to forget. I was dead drunk and cold sober at the same time.

I phoned Ria's landlady and told her I had failed to reach the Hunters by phone, that I was sure something was amiss. Would she please go to their flat and see if anything was wrong.

She was amused. "Really, Mr. Morris, you must be mistaken. Miss Maria went out just an hour ago with her new husband. Surely you are jesting. Why she has never looked better. So happy. They have left for *Konigstein*. They have also left you a note.

I told her I would be right over, and hopped a cab. I began to think I was losing my mind. I had seen them both—dead. The landlady had seen them this morning—*alive!*"

When I arrived, the landlady looked at me for a long moment, taking in my rough, dark-blue complexion, unpressed clothes, red-rimmed eyes, then wagged a finger playfully.

"You are playing a joke, no? A wedding joke, maybe. Here, too, we haze newlyweds. But of course I understood. Who could help loving Miss Maria? Be of good heart, young man. For you there will be another, some day. But I talk too much. Here is your letter."

I went where I would be undisturbed, to the reading room of the library on the same street as my flat. To the musty, oblong, dimly lit room whose threshold sunshine and fresh air dared not cross. Without the saving warmth of sunlight or the fresh, clean relief of sweet-smelling air, I read. Read, inhaling the pungent, sour smell of the Scotch I had consumed during the long, sleepless night. Read, and then doubted that I had read at all—but the blue ink on the white paper forced me to acknowledge its actuality. It had been written by Hunter, in a neat, scholar's script.

Dear Morris: (It began)

Why should I not have wanted Maria? You did; others doubtless did. Why then should she not be mine? There are many things worse than being married to me; she might have married a man who beat her!

With her I have known the two happiest days of my life. I want no more than that. I have no right to ask for more. Have we, any of us, a right to endless bliss on this earth? Hardly.

You thought of her welfare above all; for that I owe you some explanation. You must be patient, you must believe, *and in the end, you must do as I ask.* You must.

You wanted to know about me—of my life before Maria. Before Maria? It seems strange to think about it. There is no life without *Maria. Still, there was a time when for me she didn't exist. I have been constantly going forward to the day when I would meet her, yet there was a time when I didn't know where I would find her, or even what her name would be!*

It was chance that brought us together. For me, good chance; for you, possibly ill chance; for Maria? Only she can say. Some three years ago I was studying in England under a Rhodes Scholarship. The future held great things for me. I was a Yank like yourself, and damn proud of it. Life in England seemed strange and slow and sometimes utterly dismal under Austerity. Then, little by little I slipped into their slower ways, growing to love the people for their spunk, and finally coming to feel I was one of them, so to speak.

I have said everything slowed down: I was wrong. Studying intensified for me. The folklore of the British Isles intrigued me. I delved into the Black Welsh tales, the mischievous fancies of the Irish, the English legends of the prowling werewolf. For me it was a relief from political science, which suddenly palled and which smacked of treason in the light of current events. My extracurricula research consumed the better part of my evenings. My books were and always have been a part of me, and as was to be expected, I overdid it. I studied too hard with too little let-up. Sometimes it seemed to me there was more truth to what I read than myth. It became somewhat of an obsession. Suddenly, one night, everything blacked out.

I came to in a sanatorium. I didn't know

how I got there, and when they explained it to me, I laughed. I thought they were joking. When I tried to get up, to walk, I collapsed. Then I knew how bad it had been. I knew, too, I would have to go slowly.

It was there I met Eve. She was beautiful. Not like Maria, who is like a fragile, fair, spun-sugar angel. Eve was more earthy, with skin like ivory, creamy and rich and pale. Her blue-black hair she wore long and gathered in the back. She looked about twenty-five, but a streak of pure white ran back from each of her temples. She was the most striking woman I have ever met. I had never known anyone like her, nor have I since I saw her last.

You know how it is: the air of mystery about a woman makes a man like a kid again. She reminded me of a sleek, black cat, with her large, hazel eyes. I bumped into her one day on the verandah, and spent every day with her after that.

The doctors wanted me to take exercise—short walks and the like, and Eve went with me, struggling to keep up with me. The slightest effort tired her. She suffered from a rather nasty case of anemia. She seldom smiled; the effort was probably too much for her. I saw her really smile only once.

We had been on one of our short hikes in the woods close by the grounds. She stumbled over a twig or a branch, I'm not sure which. Suddenly she was in my arms. Have you ever held a cloud in your arms, Morris? So light she was, although she was almost as tall as I. Warm and pulsating. Her eyes held mine; it was almost uncanny. I had never been affected like that by a woman. Then I was kissing her; then a sharp sting, and I winced. There was the warm, salt taste of blood on my lips. I never knew how it happened. But she was smiling, her full mouth parted in the strangest smile I had ever seen. And those small white teeth gleamed; and in her eyes, which were all black pupils now, with the iris quite hidden, was desire—or something beyond desire. I couldn't define it then; now, I think I can. Her small, pink tongue darted over her lips, tasting, seeming to savor.

I was frightened, for some indefinable reason. I wanted to get away from her, from the woods, from myself. I grasped her arm roughly and we started back for the grounds. We never mentioned the episode again, but we neither of us ever forgot. She intrigued me now, more than ever. The doctors were able to satisfy my curiosity somewhat. They told me she had been a patient for some four years. Some days she was better, some days worse. She needed rest—much rest. Most days she slept past noon with their approval. Some days there was a faint flush beneath that ivory skin; other days it was pale and cool.

Just when we became lovers, I scarcely remember. Things were happening so fast I could barely keep pace with them. There was a magnetism about Eve which compelled. I couldn't have resisted if I'd wanted to—and I didn't.

I began to have long periods of lassitude, times when I would black out and remember nothing afterwards. And the dreams began. I would dream I was stroking a large, velvety-black cat, a cat with shining yellow eyes that looked at me as if they knew my every thought. I would stroke it continuously and it would nip me playfully. Then, one night the dream intensified: I was playing with the creature, caressing it gently, when of a sudden its lips drew back in a snarl, and without warning it sprang at my throat and buried its fangs deep! I thought I could feel life being drawn from me; I screamed.

The doctors told me afterwards that I was semi-conscious for days; that I had to be restrained.

When I was well again, Eve came to see me. She was gentle—soothing. She held me close to her and oh! it was good to be alive and to belong to someone.

I remember to this day what she wore. Black velvet lounging slacks, a low-necked amber satin blouse, caught at the "V" by a curiously wrought antique silver pin. It was round, about four inches in diameter. In its center was the carved figure of a serpent coiled to strike. Its eyes were deep amber topazes and its darting tongue was raised and set with a blood-red ruby.

"What an unusual pin, Eve," I said "I've never seen it before, have I?"

"No," she replied. "It belongs to the deep, dark, seldom discussed skeleton in the Orcaczy closet, Tod. You see, my great-great grandmother was quite a wicked lady, to hear tell. Went in for Witches' masses and the like. They say she poisoned her husband, a rather elderly and very childish man, for her lover, whom she subsequently married. Together they did away with relatives who stood in the way of their accumulating more money. This pin was the instrument of death."

Her slim fingers pressed the ruby tongue and the pin opened, revealing a space large enough to secrete powder.

"It's like those employed by the infamous Borgias, as you can see," she continued, shrugging. "Perhaps it was fate then, that her devoted new husband tired of her once her fortune was assured him, took a young mistress for himself, and disposed of the unfortunate wife, using her own pin to perpetrate her murder. She was excommunicated by her church, too, which must have made it most unpleasant for her, poor old-dear." The slim shoulders straightened. "But let's not discuss such unpleasant things, my dear. The important thing now is for you to get well quickly. I've missed you terribly, you know."

It was then I asked her to marry me. I knew I didn't really love her, but there seemed nothing to prevent our marriage. And she had gotten under my skin. It was as elemental as that. She said she thought we should wait until I fully recovered.

"Don't say any more, darling," she said. "Rest your poor, sore throat."

She bent over me solicitously and I reached up to stroke that smooth black hair. It had a familiar feel to it that I couldn't quite place. Of course I had stroked it hundreds of times before, but it wasn't that. Then she looked straight at me, those large, glowing hazel eyes boring into mine, and I knew. *Knew and disbelieved at the same time. I froze where I lay, paralyzed by my fear; unable to make a sound.*

"So you know," she whispered. "It is well. I have marked you for my own these many months. Now that you know, you will not fight. You know what I am, or at least you can guess. This pin you admired so—it was mine three hundred years ago and it will always be mine!"

Her lips were on mine. She had never kissed me like this. It was like the touch of hot ice, freezing, then searing. Unendurable. I lay inert; I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. I could scarcely breathe. Then I felt the blood within me pounding, pulsing, beginning to answer in spite of myself. I tasted once more the warm, salty fluid on my lips. Eve's body was liquid in my arms; warm, heady, narcotizing. Once again I felt the agonizing, dagger sharp pain in my throat and—darkness.

Have you ever wakened to a bright, sunny afternoon and heard yourself pronounced dead? They spoke in low, hushed tones. How unfortunate. Young fellow only thirty dying so far away from his homeland. No family. Good thing he was well-set in life. This sudden anemia was most extraordinary; fellow showed no signs of it previously. All he had really needed was rest. If he had recovered, that lovely Eve Orcaczy might have made both their lives happier, richer. Sad ending to what might have been an idyll. Good of her to claim the body. She said she was going to inter it in the family vault in Konigstein Mountain *in Transylvania.*

I heard them distinctly. I wanted to shout that I wasn't dead; I wanted to wake up from this horrible nightmare. I was as alive as they. I knew I had to get out of there, some way; to get away from Eve, whom I now feared. They left to make arrangements.

The lassitude crept through me without warning; I dozed in spite of myself. And I dreamed again. I was a cat running, leaping through windows, loping over the countryside, stopping for no one. I panted with my exertions. Towns and cities flew by; I had to get someplace and quickly. Then the dream ended.

"Tod," she said, "Get up, my dear." I heard Her and I hated Her. Hated Her while I was drawn to Her. There was a white mist before my eyes. I reached up to brush it away. It was not a mist; it was a cloth. I shivered.

"I must wake up," I whispered hoarsely, "I must! I'm going mad!"

There was a creaking sound and daylight descended upon me. When I saw where was, I covered my face with my hands and sobbed. I tried to pray, but the words froze on my lips. I was sitting in a coffin in a mausoleum! I had been buried alive!

"What am I?" I shrieked. "Where am I and what have You done? I'm out of my mind; stark, staring mad!"

Eve's lips parted, showing the even white teeth—those slightly pointed teeth.

"You're quite sane, my dear," She said calmly. "You are now one of us; a revenant, *even as I, and to live you must feed on the living."*

"It's not true!" I shouted. "This is all a crazy nightmare, part of my illness! You're not real! Nothing is real!"

"I'm quite real, Tod. To be trite, I am what I am, and have accepted it calmly, as you shall in time. I have told you of my life. You have been a student of legends. Legends are often—more often than you think—reality. When one has been murdered, if one has lived a so-called wicked life, he is doomed to walk the earth battening on the living. My fate was sealed as I lay in my coffin. But that wasn't enough. As I lay there, my pet cat, Suma, slunk into the room and leapt over me. That was a double insurance of my life after death. Those whom I mark for my own must, too, live on. Accept it, my dear. You have no other choice."

"No!" I cried. "I'm an American! Things like this don't happen to us! It's only in stories, and then to foreigners!"

She chuckled drily. "I'm afraid these things do *happen, and in this case, you're* it, *my dear. Make the best of it."*

But I wouldn't; I refused to—for a while. I would not feast on the blood of the living. Something within me fought. For a time.

Then, the awful hunger began. The tearing pangs of hunger that ordinary food wouldn't arrest. I fought it as long as I could. I lost.

First it was small animals; animals that I loved. It was my life or theirs. Then there was a little girl; a dear little creature who might have been my child under different circumstances.

After the episode of the little girl, Eve left me. She had no further use for me; she had wanted the child, too, and I had got it. I was now competition to be shunned. I was alone once again—alone and thoroughly miserable. I couldn't understand myself, my motives, so how could I expect someone else to understand?

I only knew what I was; nor could I rationalize on why I had become this way. I could only presume it had happened to others equally as innocent as myself of wrong-doing. In the daytime, when I was like others, I reproached myself; goodness knows I loathed myself and what I had to do in order to "live." I wished I might really die, for I was tired—so frightfully tired and sick of it all. But I knew of no way to accomplish this, so I had to bear it all, fasting until my voracious, disgusting appetites got the better of me.

I decided there must be some information on my kind, particularly in this area where vampire legends are rife, so I took to haunting reading rooms. It was there I met Maria. She told me, after we knew each other better, that she was doing graduate work in regional superstitions and had decided that her thesis would treat of the history of vampirism. She found it terribly amusing, but at the same time frightening: Didn't I? I fear I saw nothing laughable about it, but I held my peace. Why, I could have done a thesis for her that would have driven some mild-mannered prof completely out of his mind! I kept my knowledge to myself, though; I didn't want to scare Maria.

She was like a flash of sunshine in a darkened room. She made each day worth living. For the first time the hunger pangs ceased. Ceased for one week, then two. I was certain I was cured. Perhaps, I thought, the whole thing was *just a dream and I am finally awake.*

I felt then I had the right to tell her of my love. She looked infinitely sad. She wasn't certain, she said. She knew she was awfully fond of me, but she was confused. She had just come away from the States, trying to make up her mind about someone

dear, whom she didn't want to hurt, and she wanted a breather. I said I would wait up to and through eternity, if she wished.

Things went along peacefully then. We would walk for hours together, walk in complete silence and understanding. My strength seemed to be returning more day by day. We went far afield in search of material for her thesis. She would track down the most minute speck of hearsay, to get authenticity.

One day, in our wanderings, I thoughtlessly let myself be led too near my resting place. One of the locals mentioned a "place of horror" nearby and Maria wanted to investigate. I had no choice. We poked amid the still fustiness of the deserted mausoleum I knew so well. She thought it odd that the door was unlocked. I said, yes, wasn't it. Then she saw the box, that gleaming copper box which Eve had so thoughtfully provided. She stroked it gently, commenting on its beauty, and before I could prevent it or divert her attention, she had lifted the heavy lid exposing the disarranged shroud, the remains of one or two hapless small creatures, the horrible blood-stained satin lining. She screamed and dropped the lid, somehow pinching her finger. She hopped on one foot, as one usually does to fight down sudden pain. Then she was clinging to me, thoroughly frightened.

"What does it mean, Tod?"

I quieted her with the usual platitudes. Then I was kissing that poor, red little finger. Without warning to myself or her, I nipped it affectionately. A warm glow spread through me; there was a taste more delightful than fine old brandy, or vintage wine, and I knew irrevocably that I was not cured; no, nor ever should be! And I knew, too, that I wanted Maria—not just as a man longs for the woman he loves—but to drink of the fountain of her life, that warm, intoxicating fountain, greedily, joyously. She never knew what went through my mind at that moment. If I could have killed myself then, I would have, and with no compunction. But there is more to killing a revenant *than that. The Church knows the procedure. I hurried Maria home as fast as I could and told her I had to go away for a week on business. She believed me and said she would miss me. But I didn't go away. That night I fought a losing battle with myself, and then and every night thereafter, I returned to her, partook of her and slunk away, loathing myself. I knew that I must soon kill the one being I loved above all others, kill, too, her immortal soul, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it.*

She began to fade visibly. When I "returned" in a week, she was so ill that a few steps tired her. Her appetite all but vanished. She seemed genuinely glad to see me. She was beset by nightmares, she said. Could I help her get some rest? I took her to a physician who sagely prescribed a change in climate, rest and a diet rich in blood and iron, gave her a prescription for sedatives, and called it a day.

You know how she looked when you saw her. The day was approaching when she would have no more blood, when life as you know it would stop and she would become like me. Somehow I couldn't take her with me without some warning, but I didn't know how to do it. You see, since I was an innocent victim myself. I could speak, could warn my intended victim, because although my soul had all but died, there was still a spark that evil hadn't touched. I knew she would think it a joke if I told her about myself without warning.

Then, happily for me, you came along. I knew you would sense something amiss and I didn't care. I was almost certain of her love, and I decided to seize the few minutes left me and devil take the hindmost! When you told her to confront me, you gave me the happiest days of my life. For this I thank you sincerely. For what I have done and will ask you to do, forgive me!

Maria asked me directly, as you had known she would. I replied frankly, sparing her nothing. I told her that the fact that this life had been wished on me, as it were, gave me some rights, and that I could tell her how to rid herself of me, if she wished. Then she turned to me, her large, lovely eyes thoughtful.

"Tod, dearest," she said softly, "I must die some day, really die, so what difference does it make when? I only know that I love

you. Why wait until I'm decrepit and alone, with only a few memories to look back on? Why not now, with you, where life doesn't really stop? With all I've read about this, don't you think I could free myself if I wished?"

I still wonder if she really believed me. We were married three days later. I never told her what her life with me would be like —that one day I would desert her, fearing and hating her rivalry for the very source of my life, and the ghastly chain would continue. I couldn't. I loved her so, Morris, can you understand that? I couldn't betray her then and I can't now.

On the second night of our marriage, she died as you know it, in my arms. I don't think she knows it yet. But it won't be long until she does discover it. We were quite alive when you found us; she was in an hypnotic state induced by her condition. She heard and saw nothing. But I knew. And I must keep my faith. I must, and you are the only one who can help me.

If you will show this to a priest, he will gladly accompany you to the place in Konigstein, *where we rest during the morning in a new "bed" I had specially constructed for us. I couldnt' bring Maria to that other bed of corruption. A map of how to get there is enclosed. There you will perform the ancient, effective rites, and you will lay us to rest together, as we wish. That is all I ask. . . .*

When I had finished reading I stared at nothing, trying to force myself to think. This was "all" he asked. In substance, he wished me to murder the girl I loved. I could refuse; I could ignore his request. I could even doubt the verity of his statements. He might be a madman. But I didn't doubt. I believed every word, and I knew I would do as he asked.

That she had gone willingly I didn't doubt. I no longer hated him so much; rather I pitied him, the hapless victim of a horrible chain of circumstance.

I FOUND the priest, a venerable, gentle soul, after much searching. The younger men had looked at me searchingly, laughed and told me to read the Good Book for consolation, and to lay off the bottle. Father Kalman was understanding, with the wisdom of the very old.

"Yes, my son," he said, "I will go. Many might doubt, but I believe. Lucifer roams the earth in many guises and must be recognized and exorcised."

It was five o'clock in the morning when we approached the mausoleum. The Good Father explained that the "creatures of darkness" had to be back in their resting places before the cock crew. At night they drew sustenance; during the morning they slept.

There was a gleaming copper casket. Tod had not lied. We approached it warily. In it was nothing but grisly remains, bloodstains and dust. We drew back, fearful. Then we saw the other, newer casket in richest mahogany, almost twice the width of the copper box: *Their bridal bed!*

They lay together, his arm about her. She wore a gown of palest blue, but oh, that mockery of a gown! Stained it was with fresh blood which had seeped onto it from him. Obviously she had not taken to prowling yet. His mouth was dark, rich with blood, slightly open in a half-smile. His hand pressed her fair head close to his chest. She lay trustingly within the circle of his arm, like a small child. The priest crossed himself. The bodies twitched slightly.

"You know what you must do," Father Kalman whispered.

I nodded, the pit of my stomach churning madly. I couldn't do it! Not Maria, the lovely. But I knew I would; I had to. She must not wake again to see that blood-stained gown or to wonder at her husband's gory lips. She should know rest, eternal rest.

Father Kalman circled the box several times, ringing his small bell, and at one point laid a crucifix upon each of their chests. Their faces writhed and I felt my skin creep.

Then, chanting in a low, firm voice, the priest gave me the signal. Together we drove two long stakes, dipped first in Holy Water, home, piercing their hearts simultaneously.

The bodies leapt forward in the box, straining against the stake, and a hor-

rible, drawn-out wail shattered the stillness of the tomb. The priest dropped to his knees and I clapped my hands over my ears, but the dreadful shriek penetrated. My stomach turned over and I retched. The Good Father followed suit. We were no supermen and our bodies and our very souls revolted against this monstrous thing.

"Let us finish, my son," the priest said slowly, after a time, his face the color of ashes. "We must bury these dead, that they may sleep in consecrated ground."

I couldn't. I had to see her again before it was done. She lay, small and fragile as ever, her face calm, only there was no trace of life now. She was still and white, as only the dead—the truly dead—are. Tod's arm was flung across her chest, as if to protect her. I made myself move the arm, resting her head upon his shoulder, where it belonged. Then, as I looked, there was just Maria. Tod was gone and only a handful of dust lay piled up around the stake. It was enough. I slammed the lid shut.

LOOKING back now, I can see it was all for the best. Ria was different—apart from other women. A dreamer, a mystic, too easily influenced by the bizarre and un-normal. I, on the other hand, am practical almost to a fault. Had she married me I might have crushed in her the very thing that drew me to her. In time she might have grown to hate me.

Hunter, on the other hand, was a student. Introspective, given to romanticizing. Susceptible to suggestion. Had I been confronted with an Eve, I should have run like hell. To him, though, she was cloaked in mystery; hence, more desirable. What better choice for him ultimately than Ria? That Ria had to die to achieve her happiness is of no real importance. Life is a transitory thing anyway.

Sometimes, though, when I look at Ria's picture, it's hard to be practical. She was everything I shall ever want.

I had never been to Europe before the summer of 1947. I went to find Maria, to marry her. Instead, I found and murdered her, and I will never go back again.

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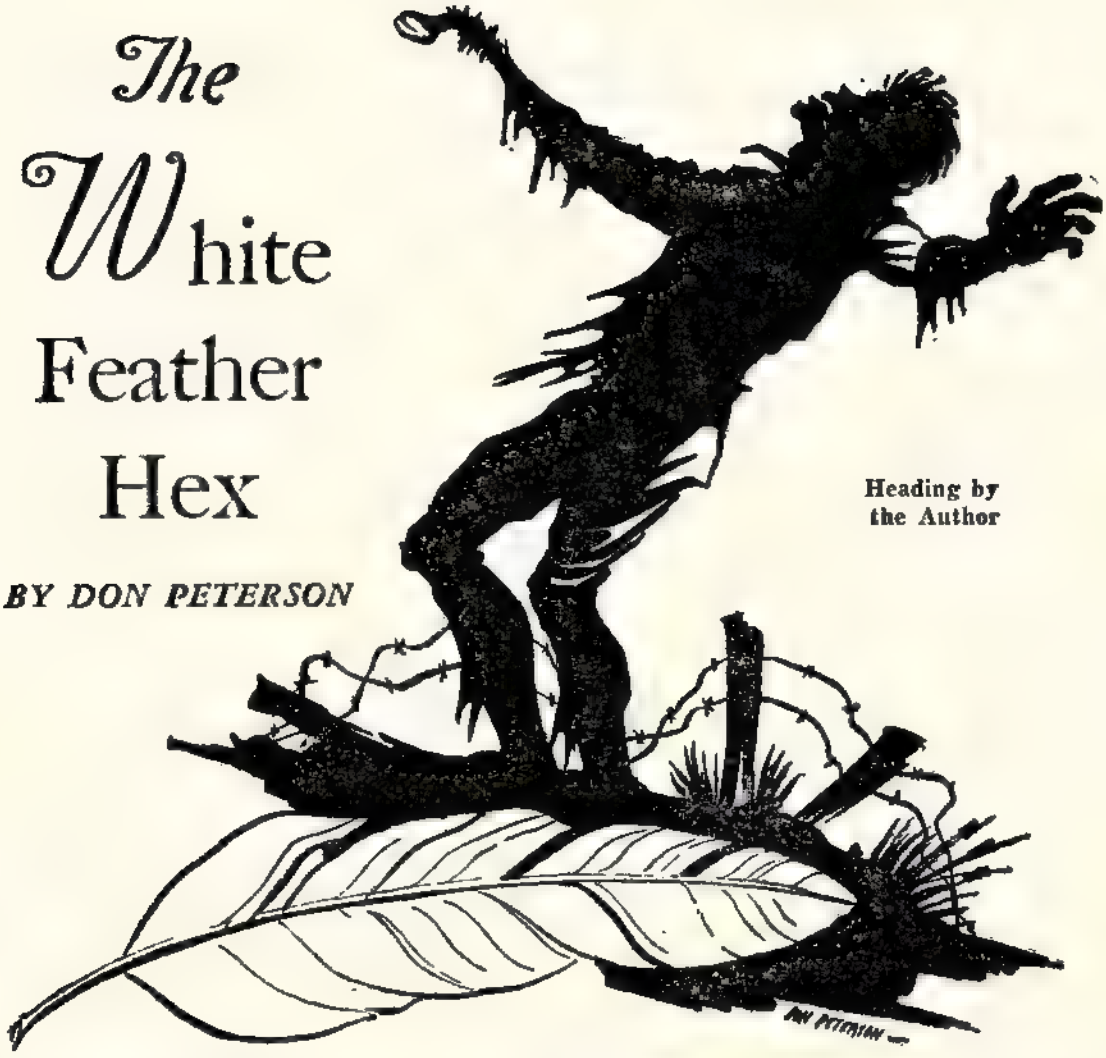
The White Feather Hex

BY DON PETERSON



Heading by the Author

IT ALL started with a Dutchman, a Pennsylvania Dutchman named Peter Scheinberger, who tilled a weather beaten farm back in the hills.

A strong, wiry man he was—his arms were knotted sections of solid hickory forming themselves into gnarled hands and twisted stubs of fingers. His furrowed brow, dried by the sun and cracked in a million places by the wind was well irrigated by long rivulets of sweat. When he went forth in the fields behind his horse and plow, it wasn't long before his hair was plastered down firmly to his scalp. The salty water poured out of the deep rings in his ruddy neck and ran down his dark brown back. As he grew older the skin peeled and grew loose. It hung on him in folds like the brittle hide of a rhino.

It seemed that the more years he spent in his fields behind the plow horse, the more he slipped back into the timeless tradition of his forefathers. He was a proud descendant of a long line of staunch German settlers commonly known as the Pennsylvania Dutch. He grew up in his fundamental, religious sect having never known any other environment. He was exposed to the sun, soil, and wind from the early days of his childhood, and along with the ele-

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You waited till the feather turned red.

ments he also was exposed to the evils of the *hexerei.* The *hexerei,* or witchcraft, was something that was never doubted or scoffed at by his people. Then why should he, a good Pennsylvania Dutchman, doubt or scoff at such tradition?

Perhaps, had he moved away from his ancestral lands and had been cultured in modern communities, been educated and raised in other schools, he might have matured. But having no time for any other diversions than might be found on his rustic homestead, he grew up behind the plow horse, tramping in the dark, stony pasture land, eking out his meager existence from the black fields of Pennsylvania.

Now, Peter's life could have gone on unnoticed among these forgotten hills, except for the strange visit of Martin G. Mirestone, student of German history.

It was a cold night when Peter met Mirestone. Peter had been sitting up rather late pondering over an old, yellowed book by the light of a kerosene lamp. The pale flame flickered about the walls sending shadows scurrying back and forth creating all types of weird shapes and designs. Peter huddled over the withered pages, every now and then glancing up at the walls to watch the fantastic games that light and dark were playing. Then putting his book aside for the night he prepared to go to bed.

He went over to the window to draw the shutters, stopping for an instant to peer out into the gloom along the stony path that ran from his house to an old footbridge about fifty feet away. Curling up from the gorge, mist seemed to play among the rotted planks; it rose and fell in great billowing blankets, sometimes concealing the structure from view.

PETER was about to latch the shutter and leave when his attention was focused upon a figure that seemed to emerge from the fog—sort of fading in from nowhere. It made its way across the narrow span like some ghostly apparition. The mist enveloped his legs and clouded his features. Peter drew back in terror, for the mere appearance of the man coming out of the darkness was enough to fill his infant brain with visions of death and *hexerei.*

As the figure drew closer Peter saw that it was wearing a cloak. All the more ghostly it appeared with the cloak sailing behind him in the wind like some devil's banner. Peter just stood transfixed as he watched the stranger come up the winding road to his house.

Slamming the shutter he hurriedly fastened it and then turned to the door to bolt that also. Too late. The door was thrown open revealing a tall man clothed in black. His face was wreathed in a wide grin—a grin that seemed to make fun of the grayish pallor of his face and the ominous appearance of his wild garb. Before the man stepped inside, Peter made a mental image of the scene, for it was to be firmly imbedded in his mind so that he would never forget the slightest detail for the rest of his life—the wind blowing about the fierce visage, tossing up the long strands of hair; the massive, veined hand that clutched the wrought iron thumb-latch, and the way that the lamp struck his face, highlighting the thin, ridged nose and high cheekbones.

"Peter Scheinberger, heh?" the man spoke in perfect German. "Peter Scheinberger, the last of your clan here in America."

It was several seconds before Peter could muster up enough courage to answer him. Drawing back slowly he braced himself against the table, and in a thick, guttural German asked, "Who are you?"

The stranger shut the door and drew the bolt. He crossed the room and, with an air of one who was accustomed to having his own way wherever he went, scanned the shelves of Peter's larder with a practiced eye.

Peter watched him closely as he drew down a bottle of wine, broke the neck against a beam above him, and settled down in Peter's easy chair. He poured a glass full and shoved it across the table towards the anxious Peter, and then poured another glass for himself.

"Mirestone," the stranger finally answered, "Martin G. Mirestone." Then,

draining his glass, he added, "Student of German history."

All this was beyond Peter's comprehension. No one ever had the audacity to walk into his house and help himself to whatever he wanted—he was indeed unheard of in his tiny social world.

"Well, what are you staring at?" Mirestone boomed out. "Take my cloak, please, then be seated. We'll talk."

Taking the cloak and draping it over a wooden peg in the wall, Peter moved cautiously around the foreboding character that monopolized his small house. Carefully seating himself opposite the man, he moved the table so that it set between them as a protective barrier.

"I'll make myself clear to you," Mirestone explained, "For I want my stay to be as brief as possible."

He poured himself another glass of wine, then settled back in the chair, half closing his eyes. "You see, I am a student, you might say, of German history or folklore. I am in the process of writing a collective history of the Pennsylvania Dutch folk, their habits, beliefs, and—" he broke off for an instant as he leaned forward across the table, staring into the frightened eyes of Peter "—and their superstitions."

Shifting his chair around in order to get benefit from the heat of the fireplace, Mirestone went on. "Now I want facts, Scheinberger, authentic facts. I am prepared to pay you well for your trouble, but I insist on information that is backed up with sound, accurate truth."

Peter became more relaxed but still slightly uneasy. He didn't like the attitude of this man, Mirestone. He was too sure of himself—altogether too cocky. But then on the other hand he had said there would be a financial gain from any business that he could transact with him. Money was something that Peter knew he needed in order to keep his farm going, and any income, however small it may be, would be welcomed gratefully. Yes, he decided that he had better endure the rudeness of this man.

For a few seconds, however, the tall stranger seemed to lose all of his cockiness, and a somber look crept over his jovial features. "Have you ever heard of the hex of the white feather?"

Peter thought a moment before he replied. "Yes. I have heard of it." Then nervously he fingered his glass of wine that he had not as yet touched. Raising it up to his lips he sipped it slowly as he stared at Mirestone over the rim of the glass. "Yes. I have heard of it," he repeated.

"Good, good. You have heard of it. Now, you will tell me about it, of course. I want to know all about it—how it is practiced, the results, and so forth."

"Is that why you came here? Only to learn of the white feather hex?"

MIRESTONE climbed to his feet and paced the room. "Yes," he said. Peter noted a sad tone in his voice, and he waited for him to say more.

"Yes," Mirestone continued. "I have, like you, heard of the hex of the white feather. I have traced it down to several families, but none could tell me anything about it that was factual. Half of the stupid fools made up stories as they went along —some concocting the biggest bunch of asinine tales that I've ever heard. But you, Peter, are a descendant of the Scheinbergers. I know for a fact that Otto Scheinberger practiced the white feather hex and passed the power on down to your father. From there it stopped. However, there must be some record of it in your family. You are in possession of the books of your grandfather, aren't you?"

"I have several of his books. Some of them I have read."

"Well," Mirestone waited. "Did you come across anything about the hex?"

"Yes," answered Peter. "I read about that which you mention."

"Splendid, now we are getting somewhere. Can you find me the book that tells of it?"

Peter finished drinking his wine and setting the glass upon the table, he slowly rose and faced Mirestone with a look of superiority playing about his rustic features. "No, I am afraid not. You see, I have burned the book."

Mirestone's face went white. "You burned it?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I don't wish to have anything to do with such black magic. It is better burned."

"But you must remember the hex. Although the book is destroyed you still have the information in your head, *nein?*"

"I could never forget it if I wanted to," replied Peter reluctantly. "If I could burn my memory also it would be better."

Mirestone went back to the fireplace and placed several chunks of wood on the blaze. A bright orange glow leaped out from the hearth and danced mockingly over his pallid brow, hiding his lank jowls in the shadows cast by the cheekbones. Like some grim spectre he rose up, towering above the little Dutchman. Peter had only to look into his eyes to see the imperative request that lingered behind the hollowed sockets.

THROUGHOUT the remainder of the night Peter, almost in spite of himself, wracked his brain to bring back to mind everything that was mentioned in the book about the hex of the white feather. The idea was clear enough, but the minute details, the infinite possibilities for mistake, and the exacting specifications concerning the experiment were blurred in his memory. He knew that with time he could bring back everything that he had read, but it would take deep concentration and, perhaps, many days of trial and error to determine the right path that they must follow in order to have success.

Mirestone, realizing that any distraction would break Peter's train of thought, sat quietly in the corner finishing off the Dutchman's supply of wine. He watched Peter closely through his slitted eyes, and it seemed that his compelling stare was the only force that could drive the frightened Peter on. Every so often Peter would glance up and see Mirestone leaning back in the corner half concealed by the deep shadows—only his partially opened eyes could be seen flickering in the fiery glow of the hearth. Then he would cover his face with his large, knotted hands, work the twisted fingers through his hair, and

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try to bring back to mind the evil recipe.

The glow from the fireplace gradually died down to make room for the streams of morning dawn. Peter blinked sleepily and got up to stretch a bit. Outside the dull morning light worked its way over Peter's farm—clouds of mist still poured up from the gorge, circling the bridge and creeping up the bank across the fields. Peter unlatched the heavy oaken door and went outside to the outbuildings.

Meanwhile, Mirestone had started a fire in the stove and was placing slabs of bacon in the pan. "Nothing like a good old-fashioned peasant's breakfast," he laughed as Peter came in the door several minutes later. "So, you brought a goat, heh?" he noticed. "Are you figuring on starting in soon?"

Peter set a small kid on the floor and watched it scamper about the room, looking for an exit. "Yes, we might as well. I don't like this business at all. I wish to get it over with as soon as possible, and—" Peter eyed Mirestone squarely. "I expect to be paid well for my trouble." He was trying to make himself believe that that was his only reason for complying with Mirestone's demands. Actually he was not so sure. . . .

AS THE heat of the noon day sun blasted down on their backs, Mirestone watched Peter pass a feather, freshly plucked from a white Leghorn, under the nose of the bleating kid. Mirestone listened carefully to what Peter was telling him. The breath of the victim had to be spread over the feather before anything further could be done.

"Tie him," commanded Peter. Mirestone held the goat by the scruff of his neck and fastened a halter about him. The other end was secured to a stake allowing the kid to run about in a circle of ten feet or so in diameter.

"We will leave him for awhile," said Peter as he walked back to the kitchen.

Mirestone followed in the Dutchman's footsteps, and when they were inside; he listened intently as Peter recited a monosyllabic chant over the feather. "The chant is easy enough to learn," Peter assured him. "You will master it quickly."

"I understand so far," Mirestone said.

"Then that is all," Peter finished, "except that you can hang the feather up and watch it grow red."

"Red?"

"Yes," Peter explained, "That is the only way you can tell if the hex has worked."

Peter went to a chest at the foot of his bed and drew out a small box of sewing utensils. He broke off a piece of black thread and replaced the box in the chest. "Now I'll show you what I mean," Peter spoke wearily as he tied the feather with the thread and suspended it from one of the rafters in the room. "Just sit and watch."

It was not many minutes before a light red tint crept up the feather's quill, spreading slowly outwards towards the fringed edges. Deeper and deeper grew the intensity of the color until it reached a pure blood red.

"Hurry outside," cried Peter. "You can see the goat in its last seconds of life."

Mirestone hurried after the Dutchman. Jerking at the halter the goat bleated in agony, prancing up and down frantically. Its eyes grew horribly bloodshot and finally closed. With a feeble, choking sigh, the animal dropped over on its side, its legs still twitching spasmodically. Mirestone bent over the hairy form and examined the head, now wet with perspiration.

"Nothing can be done for the beast?"

"No." Peter looked on with a touch of pity in his eyes, "Nothing can be done once the feather has turned red."

As if the death of the kid was their cue, masses of thick thunderheads turned over with a deep rumbling thunder. The sky became crystal clear, and a greenish glow could be seen working its way across the horizon. The sky darkened as the glistening thunderheads now taking on an ominous coloring warned the farmers of the impending storm.

It was later that evening. Rain drummed against the slate roof of Peter's house and reverberated through the rooms to where

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Mirestone and the Dutchman sat by the fire in silence. Mirestone broke the still atmosphere by putting forth a question that Peter somehow knew would be coming sooner or later.

"I wonder how the hex would react on a human being?"

Peter hoped to end the topic by answering him quickly and not beating around the bush trying to evade the question. "It would kill him eventually. Maybe not so quick as the goat, but it would kill him."

"What do you mean not as quickly as the goat—do you think it would take more time on a human?"

"Perhaps. I have heard of cases in which the hex, once it was started, dragged on for many days."

"I see." Mirestone sat back again thinking to himself.

Peter didn't like this. He wanted to get rid of Mirestone. "Well, you have your information. I showed you how the hex works. So, why not pay me and leave?"

Mirestone got up and laughed in the Dutchman's face. Crossing to the larder, he brought down a bottle, cracking the neck on the beam above, just as he had done the night before. A wave of apprehension overcame Peter as he realized the old flip attitude of Mirestone's was coming back. That meant definite trouble, and Peter began to fear the consequences.

"So, why not pay me and leave?" he again ventured. "Or do you want something else?" Peter knew that he didn't need to ask that last question, for already he realized the grim experiment that was playing about in Mirestone's head.

"Yes. I just told you what I wanted. I want to see the hex on a human before I go."

"Why? You have your information. Why do you want to see it work on a man?"

"My stupid, little peasant friend, do I look like a student of history?"

For the first time Peter actually looked at Mirestone and saw him for what he was. Of course, he couldn't be a student. No student would act as he did, or even look as he did. The words jammed in his throat as he was about to voice a reply.

"Ha—Martin G. Mirestone, student of history, student of German history. No my little oxen friend. I am no more a student of history than you are, but I need the hex for other reasons which do not concern you." Then as if he were contemplating a great new joke he continued. "But on the other hand, maybe the future of the white feather hex does concern you."

Mirestone's voice was drowned out by a heavy rumbling of thunder and the increased splashing of rain on the windows. But somehow Peter seemed not to notice.

SOMEWHAT later Mirestone stepped quietly over to the sleeping form of his host. Peter had been over twenty-four hours now without sleep, and although the old Dutchman had tried desperately to fight off the drowsiness that overcame him, the recent excitement of the day had finally taken its toll. Lightning struck near by followed with an ear splitting blast that shook the house to its rocky foundations. Pieces of slate flew off the roof and were carried away into the night. The rain poured down in a great deluge, blurring the window, making it impossible to see in or out.

Mirestone held out a glistening white feather in his long spidery fingers. He placed it within a few inches of Peter's nose and watched the delicate edges riffle in the Dutchman's breath. Crossing to the table, he leaned over the white fluff and breathed the short German incantation over it. How it glistened in the firelight! He bent closer and closer as he whispered the magic words that Peter had taught him, his breath ruffling the feather, playing about in the fringed softness. He hung up the feather by a thread and watched it hop back and forth in the center of the room.

PETER awakened and saw Mirestone sitting by the fire noting every movement of the feather. "What are you doing, heh?"

Mirestone swung around and glared at the bleary eyed Dutchman. "Sit down," he commanded. "Sit down and watch the feather turn red."

Peter didn't need to be told that it was his feather. He knew by the merciless eyes of

Mirestone that everything was over. "So, you were determined to find out what would happen if the hex were tried on a man?"

Peter was surprised at how easily he took his fate. There was no need of excitement—this was his end and there was no changing it.

"Yes, I had to know, for I can't leave until I have a complete record of all the results." Mirestone certainly was not cocky now. He looked almost ashamed of himself as he sat there nervously watching a man's fate swing by a silken thread. "I'm sorry, Peter, my friend, but that is how it must be. You are a stepping stone to a glorious reckoning that will soon take place. The hex of the white feather—I can hardly believe that I have at last tracked it down. And you, Peter, are the last witness, the last link in the chain of those who know the secret, and how can it better end than by your becoming a part of the secret?"

Peter realized that he had not much longer to live and nothing he could do to Mirestone would change his fate. Perhaps he could save others, though.

"What is this glorious reckoning you were speaking about?"

"As soon as I see how your case ends, I'll be able to go ahead and release my vengeance on those stupid, bungling fools who have thwarted my progress in the black arts. They claim to speak in the name of humanity, no less!"

"In that case," exclaimed Peter, "I won't let myself be a foothold for your damned work—it is of the devil and I'll have no part of it."

"Shut up, fool. You are a part of it already."

"Not if my body is destroyed before you can get hold of it."

Peter played his trump card. He quickly sprang back and slipped out the door into the storm. Mirestone jumped up after him, but it was too late. He peered out into the raging tempest making out the figure of Peter struggling with the hatch on the horse barn. He pulled his cloak about him and started towards Peter to stop him. The rain beat his face, blinding him momentarily, and before he could see clearly a dark mass pounded by, swift hoofs spattering mud all over him.

Down the road sped Peter on the horse—down the road and towards the footbridge. Mirestone ran a few steps and halted. He heard the hollow staccato of horse's hoofs on the planks for an instant, followed by a splintering crash that rumbled up from the gorge. A long, guttural cry pierced the black gloom as man and horse plunged down to the seething death awaiting them.

Cursing savagely, Mirestone trudged back through the rain to the house. He slammed the door shut and threw his cloak on Peter's bed. There was one more bottle on the shelf; he smashed the neck and poured a glass. If one could see him bent over the table sending silent curses into his wine, he could readily imagine the feeling of defeat that had spread over Mirestone's countenance. The idiot of a Dutchman who had to play the hero's part and save other lives by ending his own made Mirestone fairly sick. However, all was not over. So the Dutchman had died; the hex had worked—a lot sooner than he had expected though. Now he certainly would be delayed in his progress, for he had counted on examining the body for any traces left that would suggest something out of the ordinary. One thing, however, he had learned was that the hex at least worked on humans. The mangled body that was being washed over the rocks would be enough proof on that score.

Mirestone poured another drink. He leaned back in the chair and placed the glass to his lips. He was tilted so far back that as he raised the wine to a drinking position, it blocked his view of the room. As he slowly sipped it, however, the room began to come into view—the ceiling first and slowly the wall. His eyes focused on a piece of thread hanging from the ceiling, and as the wine sank lower and lower in the glass, the thread grew longer and longer until in one last swallow he was able to see the end of the line.

Mirestone's hand went stiff as he looked at the thread, for on the end of it was a pure white feather.

IN AN instant Mirestone realized that the hex had not worked. Peter's death at the bridge had been a grotesque coincidence. Had the untimely plunge in the rapids been the result of the hex the feather would have long since been red, therefore, the tragedy was no more than an accident and Mirestone's hands were innocent of the Dutchman's blood. That realization, of course, didn't bother him, for he was not concerned whether or not he was responsibile for Peter's death, but he was genuinely worried in the failure of the hex. He wondered if he had done something wrong. If he had, the last link, that could have corrected him was broken. From here on in he was on his own.

He calmed himself and began to think. He retraced everything that he had done to see if he couldn't have found some margin in which error could have crept in. He remembered how carefully he had bent over the feather reciting the exact words taught him by Peter. He especially remembered that part of the hex, for hadn't the feather been ruffled by his breath when he spoke. . . .

Gradually the truth began to dawn on Mirestone. His own breath must have released Peter from the hex. The last person's breath that touched the feather would feel the sting of the power. Mirestone sat back dumbfounded. He was to be his own guinea pig. What ghastly horror was he in for? Would he die quickly like the goat or would his death be prolonged over a period of days like Peter had suggested. He gripped himself. It wouldn't do to lose control of his senses. There must be a way out of the predicament. But Peter said that as soon as the feather turned red there was no turning back. Ah—there's the answer. The feather is still white . . . there's still a chance.

Mirestone grabbed his cloak and raced for the door. He must get an animal—another goat, perhaps, and expose the feather to its breath. He must hurry lest the spell will start working.

The slippery mud dragged him back and impeded his progress, but he struggled on through the blinding storm towards the barn. It was so black outside that he could hardly make out the buildings. All at once he saw the barn looming ahead of him. Which door? Every second counted; he would try the first one he came to. Wait—what's this holding his cloak? Mirestone turned and fumbled with some barbed wire fencing. It had snagged him in the dark, and he soon became hopelessly entangled in it. Crying and shrieking, he tore the cloak from his shoulders and ran on in his shirt sleeves. He wrenched open a door and sprawled in the barn head first. On his hands and knees he scurred across the mealy floor to the goat stall. The kids sprang in terror as he lurched in drunkenly, grabbing about in the dark for one of them. Catching one by the hind leg, he groped his way out again.

Thrusting his shoulders forward he slid through the gripping mud, tearing his way through the engulfing rain with his free hand. His leg left numb from the wound inflicted by the barbed wire, and a trickle of blood was running down his shins. Without thinking he reached down to rub the wound, but quickly yanked his hand up again. What was that horrible sensation he felt as he passed his hand over the fleshy sore? He couldn't see in the rain, but his leg told him that it was something hairy, almost bristly.

He ran on towards the house, stumbling in the treacherous mud. Once he fell completely down in the slime. Wiping the dripping earth from his face, he was told again that something was wrong. His cheeks verified his shin's story of a rough, jagged caress.

Holding his hand in front of his face he saw, amidst a flash of lightning, a curling, black claw, bristling with long, ragged hairs. Screaming hysterically he dropped the kid and fell forward into the door of the house. The latch gave way with his weight and he tumbled into the cottage.

Dancing madly on the end of a thread was a blood red feather.

Buried Alive

IT IS AN OLD BELIEF THAT ANOTHER'S DEATH CAN BE BROUGHT ABOUT BY AN INDIVIDUAL ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE BURIED ALIVE FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME IN AN OLD GRAVE. THE SPELL IS CAST IF, DURING THE BRIEF INTERMENT, THE BURIED PERSON STRONGLY WISHES HIS ENEMY TO BE IN HIS PLACE FOREVER. THERE ARE RECORDS OF THESE WEIRD EXPERIMENTS HAVING BEEN CONDUCTED BUT THEIR OUTCOME REMAINS A MYSTERY.

"Get him to tell you about this invisible playmate of his."

Heading by
Vincent Napoli

Dearest

BY H. BEAM PIPER

COLONEL ASHLEY HAMPTON chewed his cigar and forced himself to relax, his glance slowly traversing the room, lingering on the mosaic of book-spines in the tall cases, the sunlight splashed on the faded pastel colors of the carpet, the soft-tinted autumn landscape outside the French windows, the trophies of Indian and Filipino and German weapons on the walls. He could easily feign relaxation here in the library of "Greyrock," as long as he looked only at

these familiar inanimate things and avoided the five people gathered in the room with him, for all of them were enemies.

There was his nephew, Stephen Hampton, greying at the temples but youthfully dressed in sports-clothes, leaning with obvious if slightly premature proprietorship against the fireplace, a whiskey-and-soda in his hand. There was Myra, Stephen's smart, sophisticated-looking blonde wife, reclining in a chair beside the desk. For these two, he felt an implacable hatred. The others were no less enemies, perhaps more dangerous enemies, but they were only the tools of Stephen and Myra. For instance, T. Barnwell Powell, prim and self-satisfied, sitting on the edge of his chair and clutching the briefcase on his lap as though it were a restless pet which might attempt to escape. He was an honest man, as lawyers went; painfully ethical. No doubt he had convinced himself that his clients were acting from the noblest and most disinterested motives. And Doctor Alexis Vehrner, with his Vandyke beard and his Viennese accent as phony as a Soviet-controlled election, who had preempted the chair at Colonel Hampton's desk. That rankled the old soldier, but Doctor Vehrner would want to assume the position which would give him appearance of commanding the situation, and he probably felt that Colonel Hampton was no longer the master of "Greyrock." The fifth, a Neanderthal type in a white jacket, was Doctor Vehrner's attendant and bodyguard; he could be ignored, like an enlisted man unthinkingly obeying the orders of a superior.

"But you are not cooperating, Colonel Hampton," the psychiatrist complained. "How can I help you if you do not cooperate?"

Colonel Hampton took the cigar from his mouth. His white mustache, tinged a faint yellow by habitual smoking, twitched angrily.

"Oh; you call it helping me, do you?" he asked acidly.

"But why else am I here?" the doctor parried.

"You're here because my loving nephew and his charming wife can't wait to see me buried in the family cemetery; they want to bury me alive in that private Bedlam of yours," Colonel Hampton replied.

"See!" Myra Hampton turned to the psychiatrist. "We are *persecuting* him! We are all *envious* of him! We are *plotting against* him!"

"Of course; this sullen and suspicious silence is a common paranoid symptom; one often finds such symptoms in cases of senile dementia," Doctor Vehrner agreed.

COLONEL HAMPTON snorted contemptuously. Senile dementia! Well, he must have been senile and demented, to bring this pair of snakes into his home, because he felt an obligation to his dead brother's memory. And he'd willed "Greyrock," and his money, and everything, to Stephen. Only Myra couldn't wait till he died; she'd Lady-Macbethed her husband into this insanity accusation.

". . . . however, I must fully satisfy myself, before I can sign the commitment," the psychiatrist was saying. "After all, the patient is a man of advanced age. Seventy-eight, to be exact."

Seventy-eight; almost eighty. Colonel Hampton could hardly realize that he had been around so long. He had been a little boy, playing soldiers. He had been a young man, breaking the family tradition of Harvard and wangling an appointment to West Point. He had been a new second lieutenant at a little post in Wyoming, in the last dying flicker of the Indian Wars. He had been a first lieutenant, trying to make soldiers of militiamen and hoping for orders to Cuba before the Spaniards gave up. He had been the hard-bitten captain of a hard-bitten company, fighting Moros in the jungles of Mindanao. Then, through the early years of the Twentieth Century, after his father's death, he had been that *rara avis* in the American service, a really wealthy professional officer. He had played polo, and served a turn as military attache at the Paris embassy. He had commanded a regiment in France in 1918, and in the post-war years, had rounded out his service in command of a regiment of Ne-

gro cavalry, before retiring to "Greyrock." Too old for active service, or even a desk at the Pentagon, he had drilled a Home Guard company of 4-F's and boys and paunchy middle-agers through the Second World War. Then he had been an old man, sitting alone in the sunlight . . . until a wonderful thing had happened.

"Get him to tell you about this invisible playmate of his," Stephen suggested. "If that won't satisfy you, I don't know what will."

IT HAD begun a year ago last June. He had been sitting on a bench on the east lawn, watching a kitten playing with a crumpled bit of paper on the walk, circling warily around it as though it were some living prey, stalking cautiously, pouncing and striking the paper ball with a paw and then pursuing it madly. The kitten, whose name was Smokeball, was a friend of his; soon she would tire of her game and jump up beside him to be petted.

Then suddenly, he seemed to hear a girl's voice beside him:

"Oh, what a darling little cat! What's it's name?"

"Smokeball," he said, without thinking. "She's about the color of a shrapnel-burst. . . ." Then he stopped short, looking about. There was nobody in sight, and he realized that the voice had been inside his head rather than in his ear.

"What the devil?" he asked himself. "Am I going nuts?"

There was a happy little laugh inside of him, like bubbles rising in a glass of champagne.

"Oh, no; I'm really here," the voice, inaudible but mentally present, assured him. "You can't see me, or touch me, or even really hear me, but I'm not something you just imagined. I'm just as real as . . . as Smokeball, there. Only I'm a different kind of reality. Watch."

The voice stopped, and something that had seemed to be close to him left him. Immediately, the kitten stopped playing with the crumpled paper and cocked her head to one side, staring fixedly as at something above her. He'd seen cats do that before—stare wide-eyed and entranced, as though at something wonderful which was hidden from human eyes. Then, still looking up and to the side, Smokeball trotted over and jumped onto his lap, but even as he stroked her, she was looking at an invisible something beside him. At the same time, he had a warm and pleasant feeling, as of a happy and affectionate presence near him.

"No," he said, slowly and judicially. "That's not just my imagination. But who—or what—are you?"

"I'm. . . . Oh, I don't know how to think it so that you'll understand." The voice inside his head seemed baffled, like a physicist trying to explain atomic energy to a Hottentot. "I'm not material. If you can imagine a mind that doesn't need a brain to think with. . . . Oh, I can't explain it now! But when I'm talking to you, like this, I'm really thinking inside your brain, along with your own mind, and you hear the words without there being any sound. And you just don't know any words that would express it."

He had never thought much, one way or another, about spiritualism. There had been old people, when he had been a boy, who had told stories of ghosts and apparitions, with the firmest conviction that they were true. And there had been an Irishman, in his old company in the Philippines, who swore that the ghost of a dead comrade walked post with him when he was on guard.

"Are you a spirit?" he asked. "I mean, somebody who once lived in a body, like me?"

"N-no." The voice inside him seemed doubtful. "That is, I don't think so. I know about spirits; they're all around, everywhere. But I don't think I'm one. At least, I've always been like I am now, as long as I can remember. Most spirits don't seem to sense me. I can't reach most living people, either; their minds are closed to me, or they have such disgusting minds I can't bear to touch them. Children are open to me, but when they tell their parents about me, they are laughed at, or

punished for lying, and then they close up against me. You're the first grown-up person I've been able to reach for a long time."

"Probably getting into my second childhood," Colonel Hampton grunted.

"Oh, but you mustn't be ashamed of that!" the invisible entity told him. "That's the beginning of real wisdom—becoming childlike again. One of your religious teachers said something like that, long ago, and a long time before that, there was a Chinaman whom people called Venerable Child, because his wisdom had turned back again to a child's simplicity."

"That was Lao Tze," Colonel Hampton said, a little surprised. "Don't tell me you've been around that long."

"Oh, but I have! Longer than that; oh, for very long." And yet the voice he seemed to be hearing was the voice of a young girl. "You don't mind my coming to talk to you?" it continued. "I get so lonely, so dreadfully lonely, you see."

"Urmh! So do I," Colonel Hampton admitted. "I'm probably going bats, but what the hell? It's a nice way to go bats, I'll say that. . . . Stick around, whoever you are, and let's get acquainted. I sort of like you."

A feeling of warmth suffused him, as though he had been hugged by someone young and happy and loving.

"Oh, I'm glad. I like you, too; you're nice!"

"Yes, of course." Doctor Vehmer nodded sagely. "That is a schizoid tendency; the flight from reality into a dream-world peopled by creatures of the imagination. You understand, there is usually a mixture of psychotic conditions, in cases like this. We will say that this case begins with simple senile dementia—physical brain degeneration, a result of advanced age. Then the paranoid symptoms appear; he imagines himself surrounded by envious enemies, who are conspiring against him. The patient then withdraws into himself, and in his self-imposed isolation, he conjures up imaginary companionship. I have no doubt. . . ."

In the beginning, he had suspected that this unseen visitor was no more than a figment of his own lonely imagination, but as the days passed, this suspicion vanished. Whatever this entity might be, an entity it was, entirely distinct from his own conscious or subconscious mind.

At first she—he had early come to think of the being as feminine—had seemed timid, fearful lest her intrusions into his mind prove a nuisance. It took some time for him to assure her that she was always welcome. With time, too, his impression of her grew stronger and more concrete. He found that he was able to visualize her, as he might visualize something remembered, or conceived of in imagination—a lovely young girl, slender and clothed in something loose and filmy, with flowers in her honey-colored hair, and clear blue eyes, a pert, cheerful face, a wide, smiling mouth and an impudently up-tilted nose. He realized that this image was merely a sort of allegorical representation, his own private object-abstraction from a reality which his senses could never picture as it existed.

It was about this time that he had begun to call her Dearest. She had given him no name, and seemed quite satisfied with that one.

"I've been thinking," she said, "I ought to have a name for you, too. Do you mind if I call you Popsy?"

"Huh?" He had been really startled at that. If he needed any further proof of Dearest's independent existence, that was it. Never, in the uttermost depths of his subconscious, would he have been likely to label himself Popsy. "Know what they used to call me in the Army?" he asked. "Slaughterhouse Hampton. They claimed I needed a truckload of sawdust to follow me around and cover up the blood." He chuckled. "Nobody but you would think of calling me Popsy."

There was a price, he found, that he must pay for Dearest's companionship—the price of eternal vigilance. He found that he was acquiring the habit of opening doors and then needlessly standing aside to allow her to precede him. And, although she insisted that he need not speak aloud to her, that she could understand any

thought which he directed to her, he could not help actually pronouncing the words, if only in a faint whisper. He was glad that he had learned, before the end of his plebe year at West Point, to speak without moving his lips.

Besides himself and the kitten, Smokeball, there was one other at "Greyrock" who was aware, if only faintly, of Dearest's presence. That was old Sergeant Williamson, the Colonel's Negro servant, a retired first sergeant from the regiment he had last commanded. With increasing frequency, he would notice the old Negro pause in his work, as though trying to identify something too subtle for his senses, and then shake his head in bewilderment.

One afternoon in early October—just about a year ago—he had been reclining in a chair on the west veranda, smoking a cigar and trying to re-create, for his companion, a mental picture of an Indian camp as he had seen it in Wyoming in the middle '90's, when Sergeant Williamson came out from the house, carrying a pair of the Colonel's field-boots and a polishing-kit. Unaware of the Colonel's presence, he set down his burden, squatted on the floor and began polishing the boots, humming softly to himself. Then he must have caught a whiff of the Colonel's cigar. Raising his head, he saw the Colonel, and made as though to pick up the boots and polishing equipment.

"Oh, that's all right, Sergeant," the Colonel told him. "Carry on with what you're doing. There's room enough for both of us here."

"Yessuh; thank yo', suh." The old ex-sergeant resumed his soft humming, keeping time with the brush in his hand.

"You know, Popsy, I think he knows I'm here," Dearest said. "Nothing definite, of course; he just feels there's something here that he can't see."

"I wonder. I've noticed something like that. Funny, he doesn't seem to mind, either. Colored people are usually scary about ghosts and spirits and the like. . . . I'm going to ask him." He raised his voice. "Sergeant, do you seem to notice anything peculiar around here, lately?"

The repetitious little two-tone melody broke off short. The soldier-servant lifted his face and looked into the Colonel's. His brow wrinkled, as though he were trying to express a thought for which he had no words.

"Yo' notice dat, too, suh?" he asked. "Why, yessuh, Cunnel; Ah don' know 'zackly how t' say hit, but dey is som'n, at dat. Hit seems like . . . like a kinda . . . a kinda *blessedness.*" He chuckled. "Dat's hit, Cunnel; dey's a blessedness. Wondeh iffen Ah's gittin' r'ligion, now?"

"WELL, all this is very interesting, I'm sure, Doctor," T. Barnwell Powell was saying, polishing his glasses on a piece of tissue and keeping one elbow on his briefcase at the same time. "But really, it's not getting us anywhere, so to say. You know, we must have that commitment signed by you. Now, is it or is it not your opinion that this man is of unsound mind?"

"Now, have patience, Mr. Powell," the psychiatrist soothed him. "You must admit that as long as this gentleman refuses to talk, I cannot be said to have interviewed him."

"What if he won't talk?" Stephen Hampton burst out. "We've told you about his behavior; how he sits for hours mumbling to this imaginary person he thinks is with him, and how he always steps aside when he opens a door, to let somebody who isn't there go through ahead of him, and how. . . . Oh, hell, what's the use? If he were in his right mind, he'd speak up and try to prove it, wouldn't he? What do you say, Myra?"

Myra was silent, and Colonel Hampton found himself watching her with interest. Her mouth had twisted into a wry grimace, and she was clutching the arms of her chair until her knuckles whitened. She seemed to be in some intense pain. Colonel Hampton hoped she were; preferably with something slightly fatal.

Sergeant Williamson's suspicion that he might be getting religion became a reality, for a time, that winter, after The Miracle.

It had been a blustery day in mid-Janu-

ary, with a high wind driving swirls of snow across the fields, and Colonel Hampton, fretting indoors for several days, decided to go out and fill his lungs with fresh air. Bundled warmly, swinging his blackthorn cane, he had set out, accompanied by Dearest, to tramp 'cross-country to the village, three miles from "Greyrock." They had enjoyed the walk through the white wind-swept desolation, the old man and his invisible companion, until the accident had happened.

A sheet of glassy ice had lain treacherously hidden under a skift of snow; when he stepped upon it, his feet shot from under him, the stick flew from his hand, and he went down. When he tried to rise, he found that he could not. Dearest had been almost frantic.

"Oh, Popsy, you must get up!" she cried. "You'll freeze if you don't. Come on, Popsy; try again!"

He tried, in vain. His old body would not obey his will.

"It's no use, Dearest; I can't. Maybe it's just as well," he said. "Freezing's an easy death, and you say people live on as spirits, after they die. Maybe we can always be together, now."

"I don't know. I don't want you to die yet, Popsy. I never was able to get through to a spirit, and I'm afraid. . . . Wait! Can you crawl a little? Enough to get over under those young pines?"

"I think so." His left leg was numb, and he believed that it was broken. "I can try."

He managed to roll onto his back, with his head toward the clump of pine seedlings. Using both hands and his right heel, he was able to propel himself slowly through the snow until he was out of the worst of the wind.

"That's good; now try to cover yourself," Dearest advised. "Put your hands in your coat pockets. And wait here; I'll try to get help."

Then she left him. For what seemed a long time, he lay motionless in the scant protection of the young pines, suffering miserably. He began to grow drowsy. As soon as he realized what was happening, he was frightened, and the fright pulled him awake again. Soon he felt himself drowsing again. By shifting his position, he caused a jab of pain from his broken leg, which brought him back to wakefulness. Then the deadly drowsiness returned.

THIS time, he was wakened by a sharp voice, mingled with a throbbing sound that seemed part of a dream of the cannonading in the Argonne.

"Dah! Look-a dah!" It was, he realized, Sergeant Williamson's voice. "Gittin' soft in de haid, is Ah, yo' ol' wuthless no-'count?"

He turned his face, to see the battered jeep from "Greyrock," driven by Arthur, the stableman and gardener, with Sergeant Williamson beside him. The older Negro jumped to the ground and ran toward him. At the same time, he felt Dearest with him again.

"We made it, Popsy! We made it!" she was exulting. "I was afraid I'd never make him understand, but I did. And you should have seen him bully that other man into driving the jeep. Are you all right, Popsy?"

"Is yo' all right, Cunnel?" Sergeant Williamson was asking.

"My leg's broken, I think, but outside of that I'm all right," he answered both of them. "How did you happen to find me, Sergeant?"

The old Negro soldier rolled his eyes upward. "Cunnel, hit war a mi'acle of de blessed Lawd!" he replied, solemnly. "An angel of de Lawd done appeahed unto me." He shook his head slowly. "Ah's a sinful man, Cunnel; Ah couldn't see de angel face to face, but de glory of de angel was befoh me, an' guided me."

They used his cane and a broken-off bough to splint the leg; they wrapped him in a horse-blanket and hauled him back to "Greyrock" and put him to bed, with Dearest clinging solicitously to him. The fractured leg knit slowly, though the physician was amazed at the speed with which, considering his age, he made recovery, and with his unfailing cheerfulness. He did not know, of course, that he was being

assisted by an invisible nurse. For all that, however, the leaves on the oaks around "Greyrock" were green again before Colonel Hampton could leave his bed and hobble about the house on a cane.

Arthur, the young Negro who had driven the jeep, had become one of the most solid pillars of the little A.M.E. church beyond the village, as a result. Sergeant Williamson had also become an attendant at church for a while, and then stopped. Without being able to define, or spell, or even pronounce the term, Sergeant Williamson was a strict pragmatist. Most Africans are, even five generations removed from the slave-ship that brought their forefathers from the Dark Continent. And Sergeant Williamson could not find the blessedness at the church. Instead, it seemed to center about the room where his employer and former regiment commander lay. That, to his mind, was quite reasonable. If an Angel of the Lord was going to tarry upon earth, the celestial being would naturally prefer the society of a retired U.S.A. colonel to that of a passel of triflin', no-'counts at an ol' clapboard church house. Be that as it may, he could always find the blessedness in Colonel Hampton's room, and sometimes, when the Colonel would be asleep, the blessedness would follow him out and linger with him for a while.

COLONEL Hampton wondered, anxiously, where Dearest was, now. He had not felt her presence since his nephew had brought his lawyer and the psychiatrist into the house. He wondered if she had voluntarily separated herself from him for fear he might give her some sign of recognition that these harpies would fasten upon as an evidence of unsound mind. He could not believe that she had deserted him entirely, now when he needed her most. . . .

"Well, what can I do?" Doctor Vehrner was complaining. "You bring me here to interview him, and he just sits there and does nothing. . . . Will you consent to my giving him an injection of sodium pentathol?"

"Well, I don't know, now," T. Barnwell Powell objected. "I've heard of that drug—one of the so-called 'truth-serum' drugs. I doubt if testimony taken under its influence would be inadmissible in a court. . . ."

"This is not a court, Mr. Powell," the doctor explained patiently. "And I am not taking testimony; I am making a diagnosis. Pentathol is a recognized diagnostic agent."

"Go ahead," Stephen Hampton said. "Anything to get this over with. . . . You agree, Myra?"

Myra said nothing. She simply sat, with staring eyes, and clutched the arms of her chair as though to keep from slipping into some dreadful abyss. Once a low moan escaped from her lips.

"My wife is naturally overwrought by this painful business," Stephen said. "I trust that you gentlemen will excuse her. . . . Hadn't you better go and lie down somewhere, Myra?"

She shook her head violently, moaning again. Both the doctor and the attorney were looking at her curiously.

"Well, I object to being drugged," Colonel Hampton said, rising. "And what's more, I won't submit to it."

"Albert!" Doctor Vehrner said sharply, nodding toward the Colonel. The pithecanthropoid attendant in the white jacket hastened forward, pinned his arms behind him and dragged him down into the chair. For an instant, the old man tried to resist, then, realizing the futility and undignity of struggling, subsided. The psychiatrist had taken a leather case from his pocket and was selecting a hypodermic needle.

Then Myra Hampton leaped to her feet, her face working hideously.

"No! Stop! Stop!" she cried.

Everybody looked at her in surprise, Colonel Hampton no less than the others. Stephen Hampton called out her name sharply.

"No! You shan't do this to me! You shan't! You're torturing me! you are all devils!" she screamed. "Devils! *Devils!*"

"Myra!" her husband barked, stepping forward.

With a twist, she eluded him, dashing around the desk and pulling open a drawer.

For an instant, she fumbled inside it, and when she brought her hand up, she had Colonel Hampton's .45 automatic in it. She drew back the slide and released it, loading the chamber.

Doctor Vehrner, the hypodermic in his hand, turned. Stephen Hampton sprang at her, dropping his drink. And Albert, the prognathous attendant, released Colonel Hampton and leaped at the woman with the pistol, with the unthinking promptness of a dog whose master is in danger.

Stephen Hampton was the closest to her; she shot him first, point-blank in the chest. The heavy bullet knocked him backward against a small table; he and it fell over together. While he was falling, the woman turned, dipped the muzzle of her pistol slightly and fired again; Doctor Vehrner's leg gave way under him and he went down, the hypodermic flying from his hand and landing at Colonel Hampton's feet. At the same time, the attendant, Albert, was almost upon her. Quickly, she reversed the heavy Colt, pressed the muzzle against her heart, and fired a third shot.

T. Barnwell Powell had let the briefcase slip to the floor; he was staring, slack-jawed, at the tableau of violence which had been enacted before him. The attendant, having reached Myra, was looking down at her stupidly. Then he stooped, and straightened.

"She's dead!" he said, unbelievingly.

Colonel Hampton rose, putting his heel on the hypodermic and crushing it.

"Of course she's dead!" he barked. "You have any first-aid training? Then look after these other people. Doctor Vehrner first; the other man's unconscious; he'll wait."

"No; look after the other man first," Doctor Vehrner said.

Albert gaped back and forth between them.

"Goddammit, you heard me!" Colonel Hampton roared. It was Slaughterhouse Hampton, whose service-ribbons started with the Indian campaigns, speaking; an officer who never for an instant imagined that his orders would not be obeyed. "Get a tourniquet on that man's leg, you!" He moderated his voice and manner about half a degree and spoke to Vehrner. "You are not the doctor, you're the patient, now. You'll do as you're told. Don't you know that a man shot in the leg with a .45 can bleed to death without half trying?"

"Yo'-all do like de Cunnel says, 'r foh Gawd, yo'-all gwine wish yo' had," Sergeant Williamson said, entering the room. "Git a move on."

HE STOOD just inside the doorway, holding a silver-banded malacca walking-stick that he had taken from the hall-stand. He was grasping it in his left hand, below the band, with the crook out, holding it at his side as though it were a sword in a scabbard, which was exactly what that walking-stick was. Albert looked at him, and then back at Colonel Hampton. Then, whipping off his necktie, he went down on his knees beside Doctor Vehrner, skillfully applying the improvised tourniquet, twisting it tight with an eighteen-inch ruler the Colonel took from the desk and handed to him.

"Go get the first-aid kit, Sergeant," the Colonel said. "And hurry. Mr. Stephen's been shot, too."

"Yessuh!" Sergeant Williamson executed an automatic salute and about-face and raced from the room. The Colonel picked up the telephone on the desk.

The County Hospital was three miles from "Greyrock"; the State Police substation a good five. He dialed the State Police number first.

"Sergeant Mallard? Colonel Hampton, at 'Greyrock.' We've had a little trouble here. My nephew's wife just went *juramentado* with one of my pistols, shot and wounded her husband and another man, and then shot and killed herself. . . . Yes, indeed it is, Sergeant. I wish you'd send somebody over here, as soon as possible, to take charge. . . . Oh, you will? That's good. . . No, it's all over, and nobody to arrest; just the formalities. . . . Well, thank you, Sergeant."

The old Negro cavalryman re-entered the room, without the sword-cane and carrying a heavy leather box on a strap over his shoulder. He set this on the floor

and opened it, then knelt beside Stephen Hampton. The Colonel was calling the hospital.

". . . gunshot wounds," he was saying. "One man in the chest and the other in the leg, both with a .45 pistol. And you'd better send a doctor who's qualified to write a death certificate; there was a woman killed, too. . . . Yes, certainly; the State Police have been notified."

"Dis ain' so bad, Cunnel," Sergeant Williamson raised his head to say. "Ah's seen men shot wuss'n dis dat was ma'ked 'Duty' inside a month, suh."

Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, get him fixed up as best you can, till the ambulance gets here. And there's whiskey and glasses on that table, over there. Better give Doctor Vehrner a drink." He looked at T. Barnwell Powell, still frozen to his chair, aghast at the carnage around him. "And give Mr. Powell a drink, too. He needs one."

He did, indeed. Colonel Hampton could have used a drink, too; the library looked like beef-day at an Indian agency. But he was still Slaughterhouse Hampton, and consequently could not afford to exhibit queasiness.

It was then, for the first time since the business had started that he felt the presence of Dearest.

"Oh, Popsy, are you all right?" the voice inside his head was asking. "It's all over, now; you won't have anything to worry about, any more. But, oh, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it!"

"My God, Dearest!" He almost spoke aloud. "Did you make her do that?"

"Popsy!" The voice in his mind was grief-stricken. "You. . . . You're afraid of me! Never be afraid of Dearest, Popsy! And don't hate me for this. It was the only thing I could do. If he'd given you that injection, he could have made you tell him all about us, and then he'd have been sure you were crazy, and they'd have taken you away. And they treat people dreadfully at that place of his. You'd have been driven really crazy before long, and then your mind would have been closed to me, so that I wouldn't have been able to get through to you, any more. What I did was the only thing I could do."

"I don't hate you, Dearest," he replied, mentally. "And I don't blame you. It was a little disconcerting, though, to discover the extent of your capabilities. . . . How did you manage it?"

"YOU remember how I made the Sergeant see an angel, the time you were down in the snow?" Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, I made her see . . . things that weren't angels," Dearest continued. "After I'd driven her almost to distraction, I was able to get into her mind and take control of her." Colonel Hampton felt a shudder inside of him. "That was horrible; that woman had a mind like a sewer; I still feel dirty from it! But I made her get the pistol—I knew where you kept it—and I knew how to use it, even if she didn't. Remember when we were shooting muskrats, that time, along the river?"

"Uhuh. I wondered how she knew enough to unlock the action and load the chamber." He turned and faced the others.

Doctor Vehrner was sitting on the floor, with his back to the chair Colonel Hampton had occupied, his injured leg stretched out in front of him. Albert was hovering over him with mother-hen solicitude. T. Barnwell Powell was finishing his whiskey and recovering a fraction of his normal poise.

"Well, I suppose you gentlemen see, now, who was really crazy around here?" Colonel Hampton addressed them bitingly. "That woman has been dangerously close to the borderline of sanity for as long as she's been here. I think my precious nephew trumped up this ridiculous insanity complaint against me as much to discredit any testimony I might ever give about his wife's mental condition as because he wanted to get control of my estate. I also suppose that the tension she was under here, this afternoon, was too much for her, and the scheme boomeranged on its originators. Curious case of poetic justice, but I'm sorry you had to be included in it, Doctor."

"Attaboy, Popsy!" Dearest enthused. "Now you have them on the run; don't give them a chance to re-form. You know what Patton always said—Grab 'em by the nose and kick 'em in the pants."

Colonel Hampton re-lighted his cigar. "Patton only said 'pants' when he was talking for publication," he told her, *sotto voce*. Then he noticed the unsigned commitment paper lying on the desk. He picked it up, crumpled it, and threw it into the fire.

"I don't think you'll be needing that," he said. "You know, this isn't the first time my loving nephew has expressed doubts as to my sanity." He sat down in the chair at the desk, motioning to his servant to bring him a drink. "And see to the other gentlemen's glasses, Sergeant," he directed. "Back in 1929, Stephen thought I was crazy as a bedbug to sell all my securities and take a paper loss, around the first of September. After October 24th, I bought them back at about twenty per cent of what I'd sold them for, after he'd lost his shirt." That, he knew, would have an effect on T. Barnwell Powell. "And in December, 1944, I was just plain nuts, selling all my munition shares and investing in a company that manufactured baby-food. Stephen thought that Rundstedt's Ardennes counter-offensive would put off the end of the war for another year and a half!"

"Baby-food, eh?" Doctor Vehrner chuckled.

Colonel Hampton sipped his whiskey slowly, then puffed on his cigar. "No, this pair were competent liars," he replied. "A good workmanlike liar never makes up a story out of the whole cloth; he always takes a fabric of truth and embroiders it to suit the situation." He smiled grimly; that was an accurate description of his own tactical procedure at the moment. "I hadn't intended this to come out, Doctor, but it happens that I am a convinced believer in spiritualism. I suppose you'll think that's a delusional belief, too?"

"Well. . . ." Doctor Vehrner pursed his lips. "I reject the idea of survival after death, myself, but I think that people who believe in such a theory are merely misevaluating evidence. It is definitely not, in itself, a symptom of a psychotic condition."

"THANK you, Doctor." The Colonel gestured with his cigar. "Now, I'll admit their statements about my appearing to be in conversation with some invisible or imaginary being. That's all quite true. I'm convinced that I'm in direct-voice communication with the spirit of a young girl who was killed by Indians in this section about a hundred and seventy-five years ago. At first, she communicated by automatic writing; later we established direct-voice communication. Well, naturally, a man in my position would dislike the label of spirit-meduim; there are too many invidious associations connected with the term. But there it is. I trust both of you gentlemen will remember the ethics of your respective professions and keep this confidential."

"Oh, brother!" Dearest was fairly hugging him with delight. "When bigger and better lies are told, we tell them, don't we, Popsy?"

"Yes, and try and prove otherwise," Colonel Hampton replied, around his cigar. Then he blew a jet of smoke and spoke to the men in front of him.

"I intend paying for my nephew's hospitalization, and for his wife's funeral," he said. "And then, I'm going to pack up all his personal belongings, and all of hers; when he's discharged from the hospital, I'll ship them wherever he wants them. But he won't be allowed to come back here. After this business, I'm through with him."

T. Barnwell Powell nodded primly. "I don't blame you, in the least, Colonel," he said. "I think you have been abominably treated, and your attitude is most generous." He was about to say something else, when the doorbell tinkled and Sergeant Williamson went out into the hall. "Oh, dear; I suppose that's the police, now," the lawyer said. He grimaced like a small boy in a dentist's chair.

Colonel Hampton felt Dearest leave him for a moment. Then she was back.

"The ambulance." Then he caught a

sparkle of mischief in her mood. "Let's have some fun, Popsy! The doctor is a young man, with brown hair and a mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, a blue tie and a tan-leather bag. One of the ambulance men has red hair, and the other has a mercurochrome-stain on his left sleeve. Tell them your spirit-guide told you."

The old soldier's tobacco-yellowed mustache twitched with amusement.

"No, gentlemen, it is the ambulance," he corrected. "My spirit-control says. . . ." He relayed Dearest's descriptions to them.

T. Barnwell Powell blinked. A speculative look came into the psychiatrist's eyes; he was probably wishing the commitment paper hadn't been destroyed.

Then the doctor came bustling in, brown-mustached, blue-tied, spectacled, carrying a tan bag, and behind him followed the two ambulance men, one with a thatch of flaming red hair and the other with a stain of mercurochrome on his jacket-sleeve.

For an instant, the lawyer and the psychiatrist gaped at them. Then T. Barnwell Powell put one hand to his mouth and made a small gibbering sound, and Doctor Vehrner gave a faint squawk, and then both men grabbed, simultaneously, for the whiskey bottle.

The laughter of Dearest tinkled inaudibly through the rumbling mirth of Colonel Hampton.

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Weirditties of Science

by Bok

1.

A SHOTGUN will not much hurt giants,
But stir them instead to defiance.
However, they're done
When you fire your A-gun—
Hooray for the marvels of science!

2.

A chemist filled up his retort
With conjures—there was a report.
As the smoked air grew clearer,
He glanced in the mirror
To see that he'd vanished, in short.

3.

An earthman could not use his rocket
So decided to take it and hock it
Quite soon it was sold
As meteorite gold
For the Neptune Queen's neck as a locket.

4.

A scientist had the intention
Of streamlining the old Fourth Dimension
When he showed how it worked
The atmosphere jerked
And he's still in a state of suspension.

5.

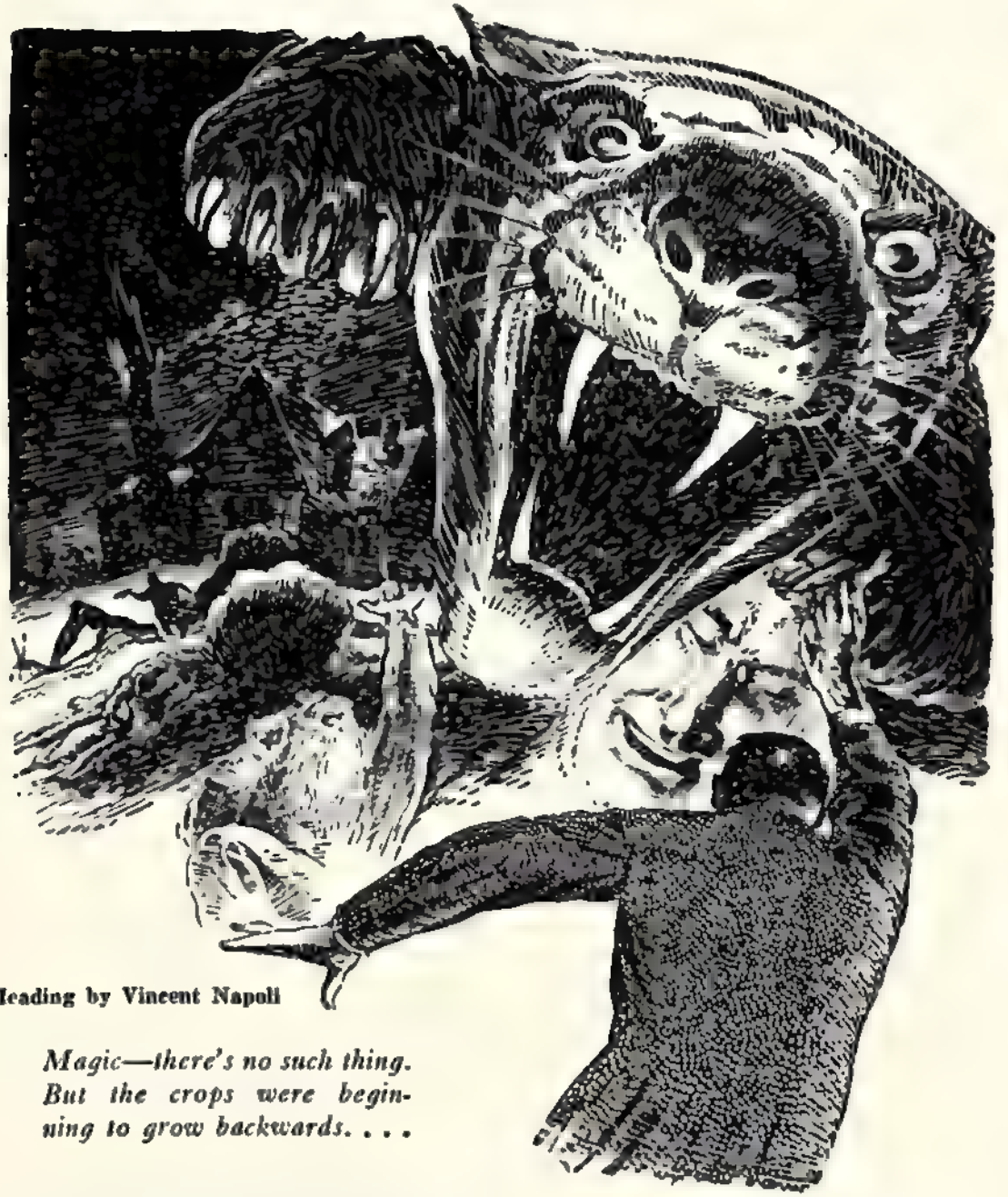
A centaur demanded the proofs
Why they muffled the shoes on his hoofs.
It would injure his pride
If they curtailed his stride
As he clattered along the tin roofs.

6.

A Scotchman who played on a fiddle
Wired its strings so that notes warmed a griddle.
The results were quite awful:
When he bit on a waffle,
He distinctly heard "Hi Diddle Diddle!"

The Invaders

BY BENJAMIN FERRIS



Heading by Vincent Napoli

Magic—there's no such thing. But the crops were beginning to grow backwards. . . .

BIG JOE MERKLOS was the first of them. He appeared at the Wide Bend National Bank one day, cash in hand. The charm of him, his flashing smile, the easy strength in his big body, were persuasive recommendations. But the bank's appraisal scarcely got that far. Wasn't he the

first buyer in fifteen years for that boneyard of lonely dreams, Dark Valley?

The county seat of Wide Bend presided over three valleys, corresponding to the forks of the Sallinook River. Once, Dark Valley had been the richest of these. Solid houses and barns stood among orchards laden with fruit, fields chock-full of heavy-bearded grain . . . till, one Spring, the middle fork of the river had dried up.

The farmers called in specialists who sank wells and pilot holes, measured the slopes. They heard much talk about water tables, about springs undercutting rock formations. But when it was done the fact remained: Dark Valley's water supply was choked off beyond man's ability to restore it. In the end the farmers gave up, left their dusty houses and shriveled orchards, and Dark Valley died.

Boys hiked over there occasionally. Men scouted for fence posts or pipe. Young couples passed quickly through on moonlight nights. And at least two stubborn old-timers still squatted at the upper end.

Now that Joe Merklos had bought it, of course, they would have to move.

"Well, won't they?" Henderson asked.

Jerry Bronson looked around at the other members of the Wide Bend Businessmen's Club. "Doesn't take a lawyer to answer that, Hen."

"Dam' shame," said Caruso, the barber, who always championed underdogs.

"They've had no equity in that land for years. The bank just let them stay on."

"They can move on over the hill."

Jerry nodded. "Maybe somebody ought to suggest that to them."

"Don't look at me," Caruso said. "Those old coots ain't been near my shop for years."

When the chuckles died, MacAllister, the druggist, voiced the thought that rested unspoken on all their minds. "I wonder if that fellow realizes what a worthless piece of land he's bought."

"He looked it over." This was Hammond, of the bank.

" 'Course, you didn't try to talk him out of it!"

"Would you have?" Hammond retorted indignantly.

Henderson jabbed the air with his cigar. "I think he was a coal miner, back East. Saved up his money to get on the land."

"*I* think he's a gypsy," Caruso said.

"You ought to know," Tipton, the grocer, laughed. Caruso got fined for his reply, and with the tinkle of coins in the luncheon club kitty the men dispersed.

JOE MERKLOS' relatives arrived that night. Henderson, who told Jerry Bronson about it, had made an early morning delivery of feed nearby, and driven on to take a look at Merklos' purchase. From the ridge, he viewed Dark Valley's three miles of width and six or so of length. Figures were moving about the gaunt and windowless farm buildings. At least one plow was in operation, and the good blue friendliness of smoke arose here and there.

"Looked like a lot of people, Jerry. But you know—I didn't see any cars or trucks around."

Jerry's blue eyes crinkled. Human nature didn't like puzzles any more than it liked strangers. He returned to the tedious civil case he was working on. About three o'clock, he decided he was tired and bored enough to call it a day. He got into his car and headed for Dark Valley.

Aside from his curiosity, he thought he might talk to the two old squatters at the far end. The Carvers were independent and truculent. Now that Joe Merklos' relatives had arrived in full force, there was danger of a clash.

As the road topped the ridge, it left green fields and orchards abruptly behind. But Dark Valley had a wild sort of beauty, cupped as it was between two rows of hills which curved together as higher, jumbled foothills to the west.

Jerry's car trailed a plume of dust as it slid down to the dry riverbed. He made a left turn and started up the valley road. At the first farm he saw dark, plump women in billowing dresses, wearing peasant scarves over their heads. They moved about the barnyard, raking dead leaves and scratching busily at the baked earth of the old truck gardens. Chickens and ducks strayed, and Jerry caught a glimpse of children. He

waved to the group and was answered by nods and flashing smiles.

Then he had a shock. One of the women was working the handle of a pump that had been bone-dry for fifteen years—and a slender stream of clear water spilled into her wooden tub!

Somewhat dazedly, Jerry drove on. He saw more of the Merklos people at other farms. Men were working in the withered orchards. New fence posts and rails were going up; bright axes flashed in the dry and scraggly wood lots.

Jerry's thoughts kept returning to the water in that first pump. Could it be that they had learned the valley had a supply again? That would be a mighty joke on Hammond and the First National Bank.

The road, badly rutted by erosion and drifted over with sand and dry leaves, began to rise. Jerry shifted into low gear. Then, suddenly, he stopped. He'd had another shock. He had just realized this road was *unused*. He recalled the twin ruts, patterned with rabbit and bird tracks, clear back to the turn-off. Without question, his car had been the first to mark the road since winter.

Then how had these dozens of people come, with their chickens and ducks and children and tools? He had seen no cars, no wagons, no carts. *How had these people come?*

Jerry sat back in the seat and grinned. He fished out his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe. There were times when he considered himself fairly mature, fairly well balanced. Yet he was as ready as the next to build a house of mystery out of the insubstantial timber of ignorance.

Of course there was a reasonable explanation. They must have walked from the railroad. It was a good many miles, but it was perfectly possible.

Feeling better, Jerry followed the tortuous road to the western crest. His long legs hadn't taken him far from the car when he heard a harsh, "Hold up!"

First one, then the other Carver brother stepped out from a scrub oak thicket—short, leathery old men, with ragged whiskers and dirt seamed into their faces and wrists. They eyed him malevolently over raised shotguns.

"Came to talk to you," Jerry said mildly.

One of them—he thought it was Ed—spat.

"Ah, now," Jerry went on in an aggrieved tone, "that's a fine way to treat a son of Jack Bronson."

The Carver brothers glanced at one another, then the shotguns lowered. "Come along," they said gruffly. In the littered yard by their cabin, they pointed to a bench and squatted down before it on their thin old shanks.

"New people in Dark Valley."

They nodded.

"They've bought it from the bank. They own it clear to the ridge line, including your place, here."

"We been here forty years," said Ed.

"If I owned it you could stay forty more."

"They send you?" the voice was sharp, suspicious.

Jerry shook his head. "I just thought you'd like to know about it."

For a couple of minutes the Carver brothers chewed tobacco in unison. They stood up, reached for their guns. "We'll see," they said.

Jerry nodded. They walked beside him, kicking thoughtfully at the leaves. The brother named Mike rubbed his whiskers. "Get much of a look at 'em when ye passed through?"

"Some."

"They furriners?"

Jerry sighed inwardly. "Maybe. They look like hard workers."

The Carver brothers cackled suddenly. "They better be! To farm that land."

Jerry passed back through the valley. A man knocking out stumps waved to him. A woman in a barnyard swished out her big skirts, shooing chickens. At that first farm, a trickle of water still ran from the pump. . . .

WIDE BEND was a normal community. Along with its natural curiosity there was a genuine feeling of neighborliness—heightened by the conviction that these hardworking strangers had thrown their

money away on a hopeless venture. So, one way and another, a fair percentage of the town's population found excuses in the next few days to get out to Dark Valley. Bit by bit the reports filtered back to Jerry, and they all added up about the same.

Joe Merklos and his people were incredibly industrious. Already they had cleaned up the yards, repaired sagging barns and roofless sheds. Curtains fluttered at the windows. Cows had appeared, and sheep, even a few horses. Somehow, perhaps from accumulated seepage, they were still bringing water from the rusty pumps. And—though it was surely an illusion—Dark Valley seemed to have taken on a tinge of green again.

Wide Bend's womenfolk brought gifts of home-made preserves, jelly, canned vegetables . . . . and came away puzzled. No, they hadn't been badly received. All was politeness and smiles. But there was—well, a sort of remoteness about these people. The kids went out of sight the minute you turned into a place. And you just couldn't get close to the grown-ups. Dark, they were, and heavy-looking. They smiled a lot, jabbering in an unknown language. They had beautiful white teeth, but no jewelry or ornaments, such as gypsies might wear. They always appeared pleased that you brought them something. But on the way home you discovered you still had your presents, after all.

The best guess as to the number in the tribe (somehow, that seemed the best way to describe them) was sixty, give or take a few.

The general verdict was expressed by Henderson at the next club luncheon. "They're odd, but they're hard workers. Darned good thing for the community."

Miller, the jeweler, agreed vigorously.

"Self-interest," Jerry murmured, "is a wonderful thing."

They turned on him. "They haven't bought a thing from us! And what if they did?"

"Kidding, boys. I've got something to sell, too." Then Jerry frowned. "They haven't bought *anything*?"

Around the table, heads shook.

"Probably," Caruso growled, "they wear their hair long, too."

In the laughter, the matter was forgotten.

But Jerry remembered it that night, sitting on the porch of his house. There must be hundreds of items—tools and nails and hinges and glass and wire and sandpaper and oil and rope and seed and salt and sugar—that the tribe needed. How could they—?

There was a step on the path. "You there?" Caruso called.

"Yep."

The barber sat in the other chair, hoisted his feet to the railing. "You know how kids are."

"Um."

"That boy of mine, he couldn't stand it about Dark Valley. He was out there with a couple of pals, poking around."

"Yes?" Jerry didn't realize his voice was sharp.

"Oh, no trouble. But the middle fork of the river's started to run again!"

FOR A long time after Caruso had gone, Jerry sat with his cold pipe in his mouth. There were reasonable explanations for every one of the small oddities that had cropped up with Joe Merklos and his people. But he couldn't shake a growing feeling of uneasiness.

Jerry went to bed muttering, for he was a man trained to keep emotion and fact well separate. But the feeling was still with him when he awoke, and he recognized it later on Henderson's face.

"We got to get the boys together and talk this thing over," the feed and fuel owner said.

"What's up?"

"This stuff that's missin'."

Jerry gave a start. He had just spent at least half an hour looking for this garage lock.

"Every day of this week," Henderson went on heavily, "I've had people in to replace some little thing that was lost. Hatchets and feeding troughs and spare parts and panes of glass and things like that. A couple of old chicken brooders that was

stored. Ten salt blocks Anderson had in his barn."

Just then MacAllister stepped over from his drugstore to join them. "Dammit," he said plaintively, dusting off his store jacket, "I been in the basement the last hour looking for an old pipe wrench. I swear I left it there!"

Jerry met Henderson's glance. "All right," he said. "Let's get the gang together for lunch today."

Sheriff Watson joined them in the back room of the restaurant. When the coffee came Jerry rose to explain the purpose of the meeting. "Our problem," he began, "may amount to nothing at all. Or it could turn out to be mighty nasty. Hen and I thought it was time to talk it over."

Briefly he recapitulated Dark Valley's reawakening. He described Joe Merklos and his people—their odd clothing, their independence, their alien language.

"Point one," he said, "most people don't like strangers."

He described the tribe's arrival without cars or wagons, without even a mark on the abandoned road. He spoke of the pumps that came to life, the river that now ran again. The progress the tribe had made seemed almost beyond human capacity.

"Point two," Jerry said, "most people don't like mysteries." He turned. "Okay, Hen."

First Henderson explained that none of the tribe had bought supplies of any kind in Wide Bend. He got corroboration from other businessmen present. Then, as he summarized the missing articles, heads began to nod. Faces got red and fists were clenched. Jerry got to his feet again. "Point three, I don't need to spell out. Much more of this and carloads of men with guns will be heading for the ridge. There'll be the kind of trouble we don't want on Wide Bend's conscience."

"Should we let 'em rob us blind?" shouted Tipton.

"No wonder they do so good!" Caruso cried.

"How about the water?" Hammond asked sarcastically. "You think they stole that, too?"

Someone shouted back, and a heated discussion raged. Jerry finally banged on the table with a sugar bowl. "Let's hear from the sheriff."

Watson hoisted his big frame, and sighed. "Jerry's right, boys. We got a nasty situation building up. Right now, my old woman's so mad at the Dark Valley people she could spit. And why? Only because she can't figger 'em out."

He brushed his mustache and looked at Tipton. "Them people are human bein's, ain't they?"

Tipton scowled, but nodded.

"Anything they done that couldn't be explained by natural causes, no matter how silly or complicated?"

Tipton thought about it, and had to shake his head.

"Believe me, boys, the only thing to get excited about is the stuff that's missin'. If they're pinchin' it, we can catch 'em, and punish 'em. They may be foreigners but they sure as hell have to obey the law of the land!"

"Now," Hammond said, "we're talking sense."

Give me a list of what's missin'," Watson added, "an' I'll go to Dark Valley this afternoon and take a look around the place."

"Everybody satisfied?" Jerry asked.

Everybody was.

SHERIFF WATSON frowned at the list as Jerry drove into the first barnyard. They scattered chickens, ducks, and children—seen blurrily as they scrambled to hide. They remained a few minutes, ostensibly visiting, then went on to the next farm, and the next. . . .

Beyond the last one, on the rise that led to the Carver cabin, Jerry stopped the car. They looked at one another. Watson rubbed his face irritably. "I'm beat, Jerry. There's somethin' here I can't get my hands nor my head onto."

"I know."

The sheriff banged one big hand against the crumpled list. "That butter churn of Mulford's. By God, I saw it! Same brand, same color. Even had scratches around the

base where that old cat of his sharpened her claws."

"I know," Jerry said again. "But it had a letter 'Z' cut into it. Worn and weathered, so you'd swear it had been there for years and years."

"That spring-toothed harrow of Zimmerman's."

"Except the one we saw had twelve teeth instead of fifteen. And even the man who made it couldn't find where it had been altered or tampered with."

It had been the same with a score of other things. Each one slightly changed, just different enough to make identification impossible to prove.

Slowly, Jerry said, "Wood gets weathered, metal oxidizes, honest wear is unmistakable. And these all take time, which can't be faked."

His implication hung in the air. If the things had been stolen, then altered to avoid identification, whoever did it had more than human ability.

"Magic," Watson muttered.

"There's . . . no . . . such . . . thing!"

"No, there absolutely ain't."

They sat looking with troubled eyes out over Dark Valley, till Jerry said abruptly, "I'm going on up to see the Carvers."

Watson reached for the door handle. "They don't have no use for me. I'll wait here. I got plenty to think about."

Jerry nodded. The sheriff would be remembering the seeds already sprouting in the kitchen gardens. The leaves that had jumped out on the old fruit trees. The lambs and calves capering in pastures washed with the green of new grass.

The road was smooth, its ditches cleared and deepened. Bright clothing flapped on shiny new clotheslines (those were on the list, but how can you identify a roll of wire?). Cordwood was stacked in every yard. New shingles spotted the roofs, the windows held glass again, fresh paint glistened on porches. In the fields, corn and oats and hay were shooting upward. . . .

Jerry found the Carvers waiting for him, their wrinkled old faces tense. They didn't answer his greeting, just jerked their heads. They led him past the cabin, through open

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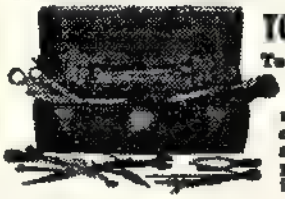

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brush, and halted at a bare place. Slowly, Jerry sank to his knees.

Except for its size, it could have been a splayed-out cougar print. But it was two feet across, and pressed more than an inch into the hard, dry soil.

Finally Ed Carver nudged Jerry. The gnarled finger pointed to a twig of wild lilac eight feet off the ground. Caught on the twig were several coarse black hairs, six inches long. Jerry looked from them back to the Carvers, then down at the ground again. He didn't speak. What was there to say?

As they started back toward the cabin, Ed Carver said harshly, "We found that two nights ago."

Jerry brooded for some distance, then he said, "Ned Ames has the best hunting dogs in the country."

They looked at him disgustedly.

"Dammit, you have to do something! Come back to town with me. We'll get some of the boys together, and hunt it down."

They had passed the cabin and reached the car. The Carver brothers looked out over Dark Valley and shook their heads. "We've lived alone," Ed said. "We'll fight alone."

When Jerry told the sheriff about the giant spoor, Watson gave a derisive snort. "Those old coots got bats in their belfries!"

"But I saw the print."

Watson dismissed such evidence with a wave of his hand. "They made it up, probably. Forget it till you see the animal itself. You'll have time to believe it then. We got enough to worry about already."

Jerry couldn't forget it. But there was a kind of reassurance in such hearty skepticism. With each passing minute, that huge print seemed more unreal.

HALFWAY through the valley they stopped to look at the river. The bed was half full—muddy, debris-laden, with a sheen of dust on the surface. But it was water—wet, tangible, undeniable.

Watson took off his hat and rubbed his head and swore.

"Good afternoon."

They turned. Joe Merklos was smiling at them.

"Hello," Jerry said. Watson just glowered.

Merklos moved beside them and looked down. His brilliant teeth flashed. "Good, is it not?" The guttural words came out flat, one at a time, as though shaped carefully.

"Better than money, in this part of the world." Jerry's eyes narrowed. "Did you know about the water when you bought the valley?"

Merklos smiled again. He was bareheaded, dressed in dark trousers and a loose, short-sleeved blouse. His neck and muscular forearms gleamed bronze in the sunlight. "You like what we do here?" he asked in his deep, hesitant manner.

"You've done wonders," Watson said shortly.

Merklos' smoky eyes held Jerry's. "My people are used to work."

Slowly, significantly, Watson said, "The thing we don't understand is how you managed to bring so much equipment. The exact things you needed—right down to the last nail."

Merklos' inscrutable gaze swung around. The smile lingered on his face. "We are a careful people. We plan a long way ahead."

Watson opened his mouth for another question—and shut it. Merklos' attention had left them. The man was listening, his head slightly cocked. After a moment he turned. "I am happy to see you making a visit. I hope you come again." He nodded and walked swiftly away.

Wordlessly, Jerry and the sheriff got back in the car. "Could you hear what he was listening to?" Jerry muttered.

"I didn't hear a thing."

"Notice anything else about Dark Valley?"

WATSON shook his head.

"No flowers. Not one dog." Jerry's hand tightened on the steering-wheel. "And who has ever gotten a single, clear look at one of the kids?"

Jerry spent a restless night. On the way to his office the next morning he met

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Watson, talking to a farmer on the courthouse steps.

"Listen to Carson, here," the sheriff said grimly.

Carson's straw hat bobbed as he talked. "I'm waitin' to see the farm adviser. Somethin's gone wrong out at my place on the South Fork. I'm on good bottom land—highest yield in the county. But in the last two, three weeks my corn, my wheat, even my berries has *stopped growin'!*"

Jerry's eyes jumped to Watson.

"Yep," Carson went on, "every single ear o' corn is still a nubbin." He threw out his arms. "And, by God, even my wife's radishes has stood still. Ain't anything on earth that'll slow up a radish."

"How about other stuff? How about eggs?"

"Same thing. Cut right down. Hens lay one in ten now, mebbe. An' my alfalfa has turned a funny gray-green. Even the fruit—"

"What about the river?" Watson broke in. "You still got water in the South Fork?"

"Way down for this time o' year. But we got enough."

Several people had stopped to listen. One of them, a big, tow-headed Swede, burst out excitedly. "Mister, you got the same trouble as my cousin. His crops, they're growin' *backwards!*"

There was more of the same impossible talk. Jerry made an excuse to get away to his office. He sat at his desk and stared out the window.

There wasn't any problem, he tried to tell himself. Anything he could not measure by experience and logic was out. And that had to include giant paw-prints and mysteriously missing objects as well as radishes that wouldn't grow.

Dark Valley was taking on life and freshness. Fact. The South Fork, and portions of the North Fork, seemed to be losing fertility. Fact. But to conclude from this that Dark Valley was gaining at the expense of the others—that was the road no reasonable man could allow himself to take.

From his window, he saw the huge old trees that shaded Wide Bend. They looked

suddenly wrong. Weren't they less green, less thick than before? The buildings and streets looked dingier, too. And when did all those broken fences, cracked windows, missing shingles show up. . . ?

Jerry lunged from his chair and strode up and down the room. Then the telephone bell tore through his nerves. He grabbed the instrument.

"Watson. I just wanted to tell you, two boys have been reported missin'."

"No!"

"The Simmons kids. But they've run away before. They'll be back."

Jerry's hand went slowly down. The sheriff's voice echoed hollowly from the lowered receiver. "Well, won't they?"

IT WAS after midnight when the doorbell rang. It didn't wake Jerry—he was sitting in bed, staring into the darkness. There was a pile of books beside him; he knocked them over getting up to answer the door.

Mike Carver stumbled in. He dropped into a chair, panting. Jerry went for a bottle and glass. Carver gulped the drink, then held the tumbler out for another.

"I run all the way down the ridge," he gasped, "till I catched a ride. I figgered you ought to know what happened. It got my brother Ed."

Jerry's lean face hardened.

"Yeah. It was prowlin' around. We went after it, an' shot it."

"But you said . . ."

"I said it killed Ed." The old lips tightened. "We gave it one slug through the heart and one through the head. They didn't even slow it down."

"You mean," Jerry asked carefully, "that they didn't have any effect at all?"

Mike nodded. He tipped the glass, wiped his ragged sleeve across his face, and rose.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the cabin."

"Mike, you can't go there!"

"That's where my brother's body is."

"Look," Jerry said evenly, "you can't help him now. Stay here with me, and we'll go up in the morning."

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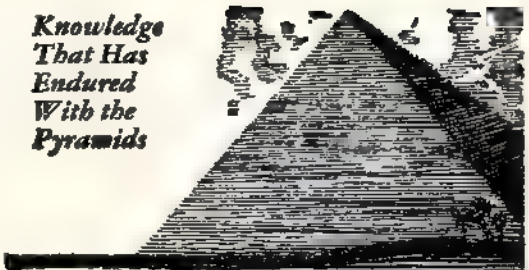

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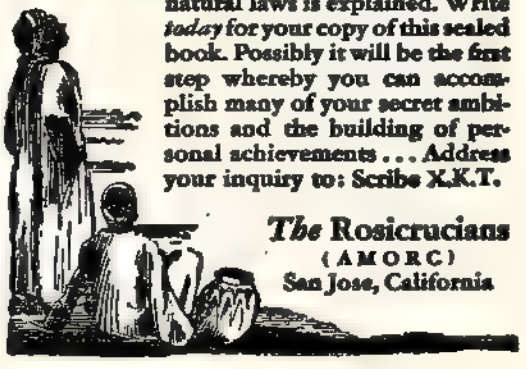

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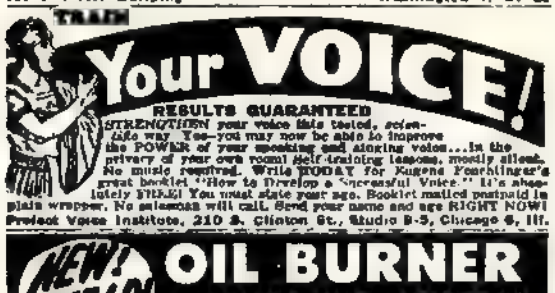
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Carver shook his head. "My brother's there at the cabin. I got to set up with him." There was no arguing against that tone of simple and utter finality.

"All right. Wait till I get some clothes on, and I'll drive you back."

A few minutes later they passed through Wide Bend's deserted streets and started out the road to the valley. Carver rolled down his window and spat tobacco juice. "Feller was up to see us," he said gloomily. "Told us people was losin' things all over the county—includin' two kids. Said crops has shrunk. Said water in the forks is way down."

"He's right."

"Said people were gettin' the idea Dark Valley was livin' off the rest of the land. Feedin' on it, like a parasite. How crazy you think that is?"

SLOWLY, Jerry said, "I'm not sure it's crazy at all."

Carver brooded. "I shot that thing tonight. Should 'a been dead if a critter ever was. Then I seen it go after Ed."

"You know what all this means, don't you? Witchcraft. Something people haven't believed in for hundreds of years."

"Mebbe they better get started again."

They were nearing the divide that overlooked Dark Valley. "Mike, I've been reading up on it, for hours. Everything I could find. And it fits. It's been the hardest struggle I ever had—admitting such a thing existed. But it was either acknowledge that or lose my mind."

The night seemed colder as they started downward. Unaccountably, the headlights dimmed.

"Somethin' watchin' us," Carver said suddenly, as the car bored on through the thick and swirling darkness.

Jerry nodded. His hands gripped the wheel until the knuckles were white. Sweat began to glisten on his forehead.

The headlights picked out a dark spot, that looked like a yawning hole. Jerry stamped on the brake, skidded slightly. But there was only a shallow rut, deformed by shadows. He pressed the accelerator . . . and the motor died. Hurriedly, he jabbed

the starter button, pumped the gas pedal. Again he pushed it, and again, as the lights faded from the drain on the battery.

"What's the matter?" Carver's old voice was thin.

"Flooded, maybe. Better let her sit a minute."

The darkness pressed close around them, shifted and danced. Chill air moved over their faces.

"Mike."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't that animal come after you, too?"

Carver breathed heavily for a moment. Then he took something from his shirt pocket and held it out. Jerry's fingers moved over it. A crucifix.

"My mother give it to me a long time ago."

"That's probably the only thing that could have saved you. From what I read, they can't stand a cross. And silver's got something to do with it." Jerry reached into his own pocket. "Feel this."

Carver's rough hand fumbled over the object.

"Made it this evening. Took a cold chisel and hammer to an old silver tray. Not fancy, but it was all I had."

"You done that, before I came and told you about Ed?"

Jerry nodded grimly. "I'm convinced we're up against something terrible. And believe me, Mike, I'm scared."

THE shadows drew closer, thicker still. They seemed charged with menace.

With a catch in his voice, Jerry said, "Maybe now's the time to try it."

Carver's head jerked around.

"I mean smash Merklos and his tribe for good."

"How?"

"With fire, and the silver crosses."

After a long pause, Carver said, "What about Ed?"

"We'll get to your cabin. We're not far from the first farm. We can go right up the valley. If it works."

"And if it don't?"

"We might end up like Ed."

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Carver turned and spat out the window. "I don't want to, but I will."

They got out of the car, into the humming darkness. They took gunny sacks and rags from the trunk compartment and soaked them in oil from the crankcase. They wired a bundle on the extension handle of the jack, and another on the radio aerial rod which Jerry unscrewed.

They tried to start the car once more, without success. So they turned off the lights and left it. With one torch burning, they started up the road for the first gate.

Dark Valley's shadowy legions closed in. There was a rustling and a whispering all around them. There were shiny glints where none ought to be. There was an overwhelming feeling that something frightful waited—just beyond the edge of darkness.

"The gate," Carver said hoarsely.

Jerry unclenched his jaws and lit the second torch. The flare-up reflected from the blank windows ahead.

"What about the wimmen? What about the kids?"

Jerry spoke jerkily, his eyes on the house. "There aren't any kids. What we saw was something else. The women are the same as the men, the same as the thing that killed Ed. Don't worry about them. Hold the cross in front of you, and for God's sake hang onto it!"

The darkness swelled like a living thing. It swayed and clutched at the torches. Somewhere a high whining began, like a keening wind.

There were sudden sounds from the house—bangings and scramblings. Carver faltered.

"On!" Jerry said savagely, and began to run. He touched his home-made crucifix to the wood of the porch, and with the other hand brought the torch down. Blue sparks jumped out at him. The dry wood hissed and blazed up furiously.

A frightful scream rang out. There was the tinkle of breaking glass. Formless figures thudded to the ground and scuttled away on all fours, headed up the valley.

Within minutes the farmhouse was a

mass of roaring flame. Jerry backed away from it. He saw Carver outlined against the glowing barn, which he had fired. They came together and hurried back to the road. There they stopped to watch the pillar of flame and smoke, boiling upward.

"It worked," Carver said.

Jerry nodded. "We can't kill them. But we can drive them out."

"Wimmen and kids," Carver said bitterly. "Did you see them things that came out?"

"Yes." Jerry was drenched in sweat and the torch trembled in his hand. "Let's get on to the next one, Mike."

They went on to the neighboring farm, and to the one after that, while the shadows pulsed in an unholy turmoil. The night swarmed with malignant invisible forces, that tried to blow the flame from their torches, that flayed them with the naked sword of fear. There were hideous shapes, half-seen. There were waves of terror like a physical shock. There were puffs of ordure, so rank they gagged.

But they plodded through it, faces set, sweating and agonized. Till, halfway up the valley *it* came . . .

Carver knew it first. His leathery face paled; his hands fumbled instinctively for the gun he was not carrying.

Then Jerry said hoarsely, "Mike, did you hear that?"

Carver nodded dumbly.

Clearly, now, came the sound of those huge paws, padding first on one side of them, then the other. Jerry clutched his cross till the rough edges bit deep into his hand.

It seemed that his very life was bound up with the torch that now smoked and struggled to burn. If its feeble flame went out, that meant extinction, black and final.

Then he became aware that Carver was no longer beside him. He whirled. Ten yards behind, the other was bending down, scrabbling frantically in the dust.

"I dropped it!" he shouted. "I can't find it!"

Jerry tried to reach him, but the other thing was quicker. A whirlpool of black-

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ness engulfed Carver, blotted him out. Then Jerry was confronted by an unbelievable sight—a great, savage head, towering over him, its eyes glowing redly and foam creaming over gigantic, open jaws.

DESPERATELY, he shoved his cross straight at it. The thing spat and roared deafeningly. The thud of its paws shook the ground. It lashed out with monstrous claws that sliced his skin. Half-stunned, Jerry kept lunging toward it, till finally his cross touched its coarse hide. There was a crackle of blue flame, a shriek that split the night, and the thing disintegrated in roiling clouds of bitter smoke.

Jerry swayed. The hand that held the cross was numb and tingling. Like an automaton, he turned, went back, and knelt beside the crumpled shape that had been Mike Carver. Then he rose, still carrying the feebly flickering torch, and plodded on. . . .

They met him as he was coming back—Watson, Henderson, Caruso, Miller, Hammond and the rest. They had flashlights and guns and tear gas, and their faces were grim and desperate.

"We found your car," they said. "We could see the flames from Wide Bend. What in hell has been going on?"

Jerry stared at them. He dropped the dead torch. One hand tried to put the cross back into his pocket. His face was black, his hair singed, his side wet with blood.

"It's all over," he croaked. "They're gone. Dark Valley is free again."

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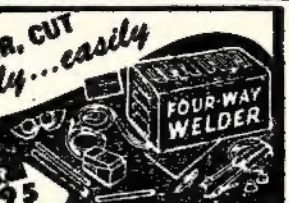

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